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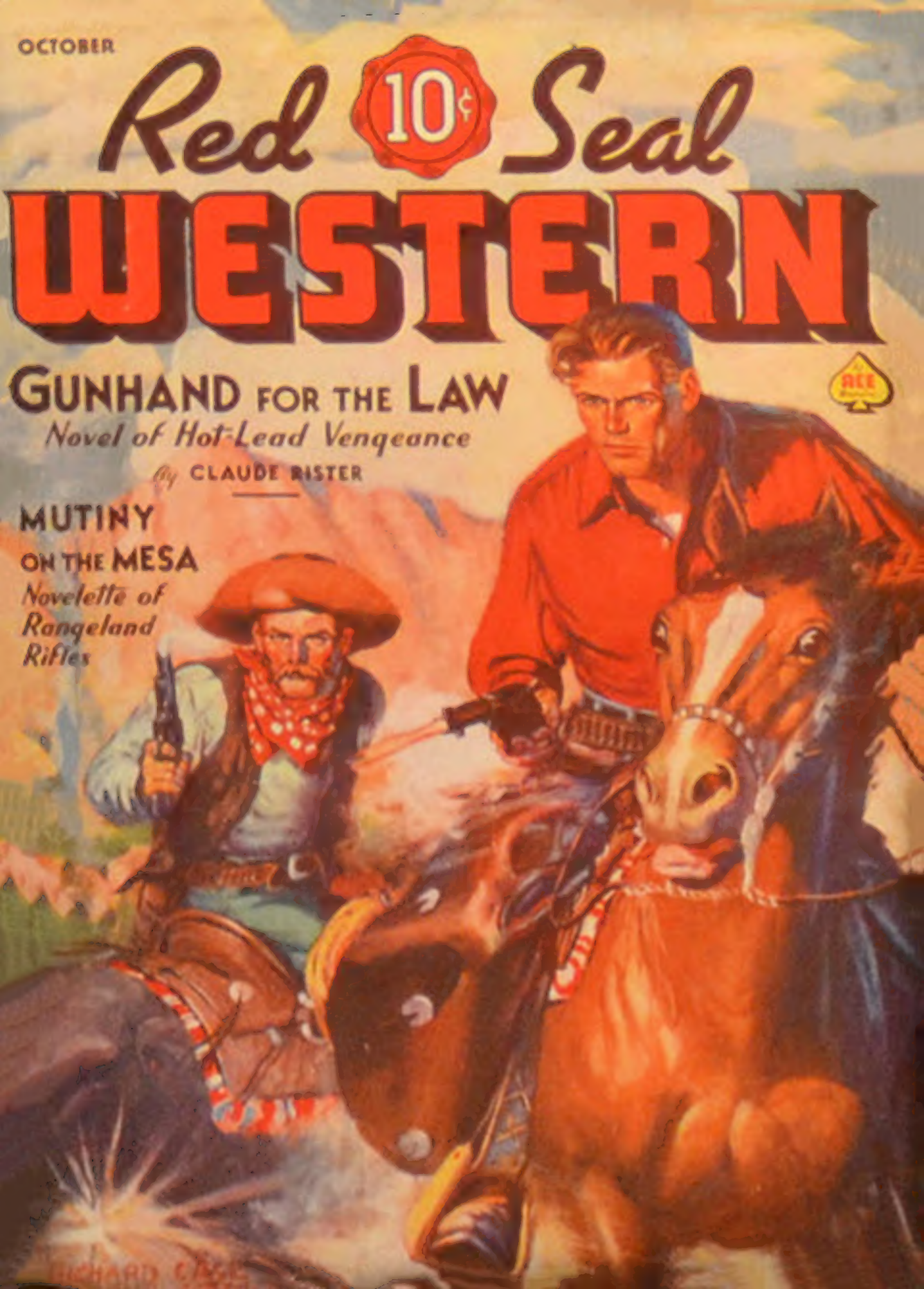

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Inside front cover

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HANGTREE BAIT (Short Story) WILFRED MCCORMICK 79

The kid wrangler of the Box-Four outfit tried to play an ace-in-the-hole to cheat the hangtree—only to be double-crossed by an hombre who had claimed to be his amigo.

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Two hard-bitten oldsters were driven into a horn-locking showdown by a pistol-smart pilgrim.

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Instead of being handed a sheriff's star, the last of the Morrisons got a trigger ticket that sent him to jail.

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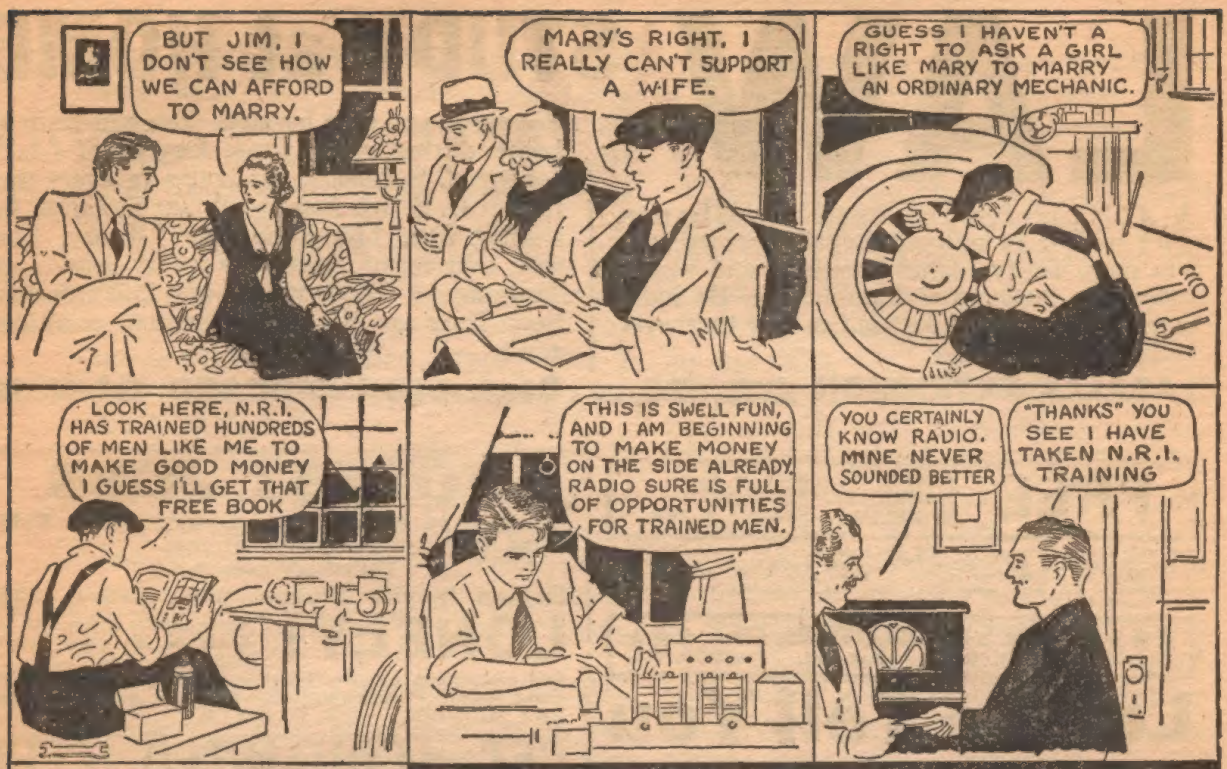
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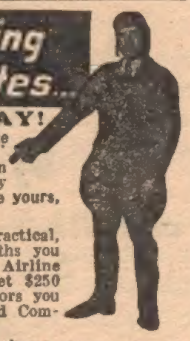

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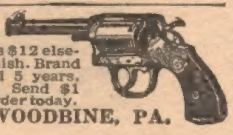

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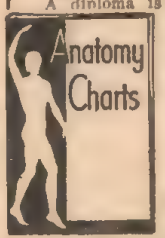

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Gunhand for the Law

CHAPTER I

MARKED FOR BOOT-HILL

THE memory of that tragic day was never to be erased from Terry McGonigle's mind. The picture of its stunning events was to remain a horrible nightmare in his mind as long as he should live. At midday the boy sat humped on a stool within his uncle's small printing establishment, "throwing in" type. Watching him, fascinated, was little Consuelo Prather, daughter of a local storekeeper. She often came to watch him like this, and to marvel at the deft way in which he flicked the type into the small boxes.

Silvery-haired Mort McGonigle, editor and publisher of the Texton *Searchlight*, a four-sheet newspaper, drew on his long, black coat.

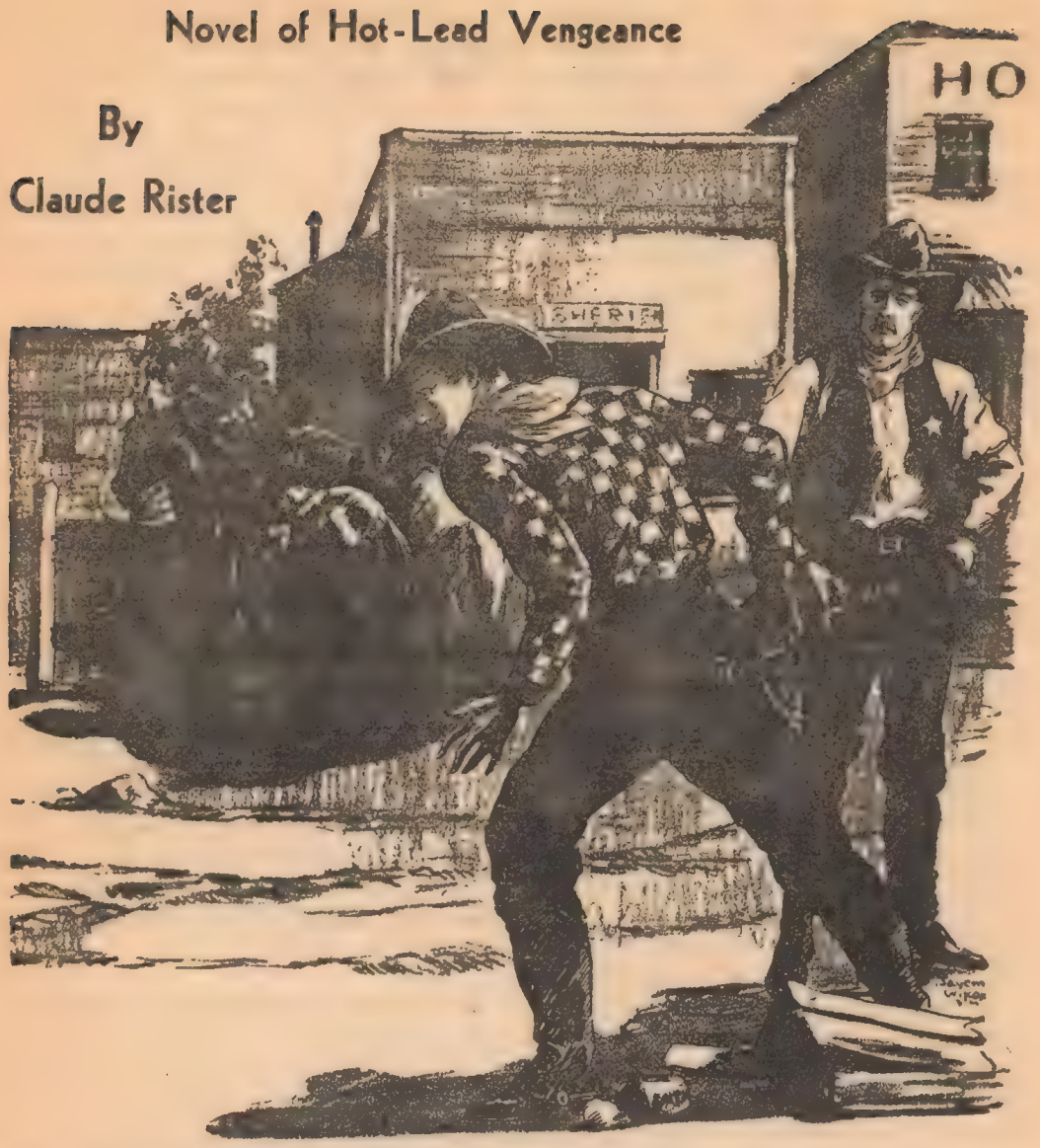
"Going to dinner, son," he said casually, as he quit his pigpen office and headed for the door.

His tall, bony form disappeared. A moment later the girl and the boy heard angry voices; then two shots pounded out in quick succession. Con-

Novel of Hot-Lead Vengeance

By

Claude Rister



Gunsmoke McGonigle had come home—home to spend a holster holiday in the kill-crazy cowtown that had seared his soul with bitter memories. But when he rode out recklessly to round up the long-looping lobos that had shadowed his life with misery, he flung himself into a drygulcher's dragnet—with a posse's pistols on one side of him, and back-shooting bushwhackers on the other.

suelo Prather gasped and her eyes flew wide open. Terry muttered an exclamation. He wheeled off the high stool and rushed down the room, with the little girl following at his heels. On the threshold they lurched to a stop, and gazed in mute horror.

On the ground, a strangely twisted figure, lay Terry's Uncle Mort. The editor's soft black hat was crushed

unnaturally. One side of his silver-haired head rested against the hard ground. Near the curled, ink-stained fingers of the right hand lay the six-gun which the publishing man had been carrying of late.

Ten paces beyond the black-coated form stood "Sledge" Hammer, iron-jawed owner of the Fork H spread, and his son, Cord. In the ranchman's right fist was a heavy six-shooter, and from its muzzle a faint haze of smoke was oozing—mockingly, it seemed!

Sledge Hammer deliberately holstered his Colt. He was a thick, muscular fellow of forty-six, with a leonine visage and eyes like polished copper. Quick with his gun, quick of temper, powerful of will and of body, he was a prominent figure in local affairs.

Texton had been brutally cruel to young Terry McGonigle. His homesteader father had been killed by a horse thief whom McGonigle had surprised trying to get away with a fine stallion. Terry's ailing mother had died shortly thereafter, chiefly from shock. His uncle had come to the border town and adopted him.

Being an experienced publisher of small-town sheets, Mort McGonigle immediately had launched the Texton *Searchlight*, and had vigorously, perhaps foolishly, opened a campaign to clean up that Rio Grande hell-hole. Most of the editorial shafts had been directed at Hammer and his crowd. Mort McGonigle had been warned, then threatened. Now the good man who had dared to attack the evils of Texton almost single-handed was dead.

Something like a shuddering sob shook Terry; then, rage flaming in his eyes, face pale and fists clenched at his sides, he surged impulsively toward the two Hammers. The next instant he jerked to a stop. The leonine ranchman's heavy Colt had ripped from leather and was covering him. The boy was unarmed, and he would not have stood a shadow of a chance in a gunfight with Sledge Hammer, even if he had been carrying a gun. Terry McGonigle had never practiced the quick draw.

Young Cord Hammer now stepped forward. He was only three years Terry's senior, but he had grown up fast—a strapping, almost man-sized young fellow; handsome and arrogant, fast with a six-gun despite his youth.

He thrust his father aside. With a sneering curl of his lips, cold blue eyes drilling the printer's-devil he said, "Leave him to me, Paw. You can't shoot a kid, but me—Come on, typetosser, son of a stinking nester. Pick up that cutter your skunk of an uncle dropped and we'll shoot it out—if you ain't yellow."

Ungovernable rage swirled within Terry McGonigle's breast. Under ordinary circumstances he would have realized that it would be sheer suicide for him—so slow with a pistol—to gunfight young Cord Hammer, but just now the boy was berserk. Uttering a wild, shrill cry like that of a bobcat, he sprang to his uncle's side, stooped and reached a hand for the six-gun which lay at the tips of the curled fingers.

LITTLE "SULIE" PRATHER was of rangeland fighting stock. Her dad once had owned the small Rafter Thirty-three spread, but like so many others that ranch had been gobbled by the range-greedy Hammers. Prather then had turned storeman. Now unnoticed by any one the girl sprang from the doorway, eyes flashing, and grabbed up a rock.

As Terry's reaching fingers touched the old Colt forty-five which lay on the ground, Cord Hammer's right hand slapped leather. His gun fairly flew from the holster, tilted upward and roared—but the slug missed Terry McGonigle by a full yard.

With a scream of rage Sulie Prather had flung the rock. It had bounced from Cord Hammer's chin and the young gunman's shot had gone wild. The blow had stunned him

for an instant. He had dropped his Colt and now was staggering backward.

Terry gave Sulie an angry glance, as if to ask her why she hadn't minded her own business. Then he shoved his uncle's old frontier model Colt under his waistband and went toward Cord Hammer like a rushing bobcat. Cord snarled, lunged at him, swung a fist. Terry neatly sidestepped. As Cord wheeled, the printer's-devil smashed him in the nose, swung the other fist in a blow that cracked to the jaw and sat young Hammer down abruptly.

Terry gave Cord's gun a kick which sent it scooting far away. White-lipped and fiery-eyed, he turned upon the dour ranchman. His voice was strained and jerky as he said, "Draw, Sledge Hammer, or I'll shoot you where you stand."

What a crazy thing to do! He, a kid who knew nothing at all about gunfighting! Sledge Hammer, one of the fastest, most feared leadslingers in the whole tough border country! There was no telling what might have come of the boy's rashness, had not there been a babbling of excited voices, a rushing of feet; and had not a crowd come pouring around a corner of the little printing establishment.

At the forefront of that rushing group was the sheriff. "What's this?" he demanded gruffly, as human forms swirled about the scene of belligerence. His glance flicked from the dead man to the bloody-nosed Cord Hammer, then back and forth between Sledge Hammer and young Terry McGonigle.

"Murder, that's what!" the boy fairly yelled. "They've been threatening that if Uncle Mort didn't stop his cleanup campaign they'd get him, and now—" His voice choked off. He looked at the twisted form on the ground and his shoulders heaved. A volcano was seething inside him at that instant.

"The kid don't know what he's talking about," Sledge Hammer stated coolly. "He didn't witness the fight. It was like this: me and McGonigle had words again. He lost his temper and went for his cutter. It was either me or him, and so—I beat him. Give him two slugs before he could fire a single one, and—there he is." He nodded toward the body.

The cold callousness of the explanation, the falsehood, enraged Terry McGonigle all the more. "It's a lie! The dirty, low-down polecat murdered Uncle Mort in cold blood, I tell you!"

Sledge Hammer went on calmly. "The boy has gone loco. He knocked Cord down when my son wasn't doing a thing, then he threatened to shoot us both. You got here just in time to keep me from having to cold-konk him."

Sulie Prather, shoved back a considerable distance by the crowding men, had not been able to hear what Hammer had said, or she doubtless would have screamed that he had lied.

"Here, give me that hogleg," the sheriff demanded gruffly, and he snatched the six-shooter from Terry's waistband. The lad struggled to regain possession of the weapon, but the officer collared him away. At last Terry desisted, but he was still enraged. He glared about, asked huskily:

"Why don't somebody do something? Are you going to let Sledge Hammer get away with this new killing?"

Young Cord Hammer now bit out, "He took me by surprise a minute ago, sheriff. Besides, I was still dazed from being hit on the chin with a rock throwed by Sulie Prather. Give him back his cutter, and turn him loose. I'll beat the devil out of him with my fists, then shoot him to dollrags in a man-to-man gunfight."

There was no doubt at all that he could have done both these things. He was older, bigger and stronger than

Terry, and he was very fast on the draw for one of his age.

"Shut up the fight talk, all of you!" rapped the sheriff. Then he turned and said gently to Terry, "Better go down and talk to the undertaker about the funeral. I'll arrange for an inquest." He gave the boy a shove.

"Come along to my office, you Hammers," he ordered. "I want to ask you some questions."

Sledge Hammer nodded unconcernedly. His big face was as expressionless as a lump of rock. But there was a sneering smile on Cord Hammer's lips as he followed the officer.

Dazedly, Terry McGonigle headed for the undertaker's establishment. As he did so his stricken gaze turned toward the printshop, and met that of the little girl. She now stood in the doorway, the better to see what was going on. She was an angry figure in pigtails and gingham. Her small back was stiff and her arms were akimbo. Her lips were tight, her brown eyes blazing. The freckled face was alternately red, then pale. Terry's agonized gaze brought her quickly to him.

"Why didn't the sheriff let you finish them off? The murderers!" she demanded.

He looked away, his face stony, and mumbled, "I guess he saved me from being killed, at that. Both Sledge and Cord Hammer can outdraw me by a mile. Truth is, Sulie, I'm no draw-kid at all. Never figured I'd have to shuck a hogleg in a hurry, so I've never practiced."

She softened, then, took one of his hands in both her own. "You're right, Terry. They would have killed you, too. I'm glad—" her voice choked off and streaks of brine coursed swiftly down the plump, freckled cheeks.

Her sympathy brought a change of emotion surging up within Terry McGonigle. Tears rushed to his eyes, for he was but a lad of fourteen. He did not wish to be unkind, but he did not want his little friend to see him cry, so he pushed her away. With teeth gritted so hard that his jaws ached, he walked rapidly away down the street.

THE sheriff did not hold the Hammers for the shooting of Mort McGonigle. Since they were the only witnesses to the tragic affair he had to accept their version of the killing. The body was taken to the coroner's office, and there in the afternoon an inquest was held. The verdict was the inevitable: "Justifiable homicide —self-defense." Sledge Hammer had killed again and got away with it.

The graves of Terry's parents were out in the quiet hills where once had been the McGonigle homestead, but which land was now a part of the great Fork H ranch. The lad arranged to have his uncle buried out there also, promising the undertaker that he would pay for the funeral with proceeds from the sale of the little printing establishment. Ruthless evildoers were not yet through dealing the boy grief, however.

Up in the Crazy Horse Saloon four men planned the destruction of the printshop. "If we don't," growled Sledge Hammer, "it may fall into the hands of some other crank who'll likewise get a notion it's his God-ordained duty to clean up the neighborhood."

"Yes," agreed the sleek owner of the Crazy Horse, "we'd better wipe the slate clean while we're at it."

Shortly thereafter the place went up in flames and smoke. The type was melted and the little hand-press rendered useless. Even Terry McGonigle's personal belongings were lost, save for what he had on his back. He and his uncle had made their home in the rear part of the building.

This new blow left the boy utterly crushed. He was too dazed even to shed tears or to rage. He simply stood, hands clenched inside his pants pockets, staring like an amnesia victim while the printshop burned. The crowd watched him silently, pityingly for the most part.

When it was over, when there remained of the printing establishment only a bed of embers and some fire-blackened, useless equipment, Terry McGonigle turned slowly and walked uptown. His gaze was upon the ground, moving like a person in a dream.

He turned to the undertaker's office. "You see how it is," he stated dully. "I can't pay now, but I will—some day. I promise."

That heartless, cadaverous buzzard said callously, "Hell, kid, you cain't expect me to stand the expense of the burial! How could you pay—before a good many years, anyhow? And you ain't got any folks to help you out. Nah, if this is to be a charity buryin', let the county handle it."

And so Mort McGonigle was given a pauper's funeral. The body was not laid to rest beside those of Terry's parents, as the boy had wished. It was planted on the town's boot-hill, amidst the graves of all sorts of border evil-doers and gunmen.

Just as darkness was falling Terry went to the sheriff and said, "I'd like to get Uncle Mort's forty-five. I've talked with them covered wagon folks who're driving up into central New Mexico, and they've agreed to take me with them. They say chances are mighty good up there."

The sheriff nodded sympathetically. "I reckon it'll be a heap better for you in that country than here, son." Then he gave the youth a keen look. "But you ain't by any chance thinking of using that cutter before you leave Texton? On one or both of the Hammers, I mean?"

The grim-faced kid was silent, apparently deeply thoughtful for a moment, and then slowly he wagged his head. "Nope, I've got gumption enough to realize I wouldn't have a chance with either of them in a stand-up gunfight—and I'm no drygulcher. I won't give 'em the pleasure of getting me like they did my uncle. I'll wait and get ready. Then some day I'll come back and kill them both—shoot hell out of this whole cussed, crooked town!" He had lashed out the last few words fiercely. Now his jaws were set hard; his eyes were bleak, deadly.

The sheriff got up and laid a hand on the lad's shoulder. In a voice of gruff kindness he said, "Get such poisonous thoughts out of your mind, son. They're what make outlaws and killers."

Without another word, then, he brought Mort McGonigle's old frontier model Colt and ammunition belt. Terry buckled on the weapon and pulled the leather tongue of the belt to the last notch. Even so, the outfit sagged almost ludicrously from his slim waist.

"Mort had a few dollars on him, but he owed some bills and—"

"Yeah, I know. I'll get along. Them covered wagon folks say I can work for my keep."

As he walked out the sheriff called after him, "So long, kid—in case I don't see you again before the covered wagon outfit pulls out in the morning."

Terry spoke not a word in reply. He just walked away into the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER II

GUNSMOKE MCGONIGLE

TERRY returned to his uncle's grave. It was a silent farewell. The wagon-train was to hit the trail at dawn, and there scarcely would be time for him to visit boot-hill in the morning.

The western horizon was flushed. Elsewhere there was purple gloom. The moon came up and dispelled some of it. The stars were cold, unpitying eyes, looking down upon him. The lights of the tough border town glowed in stolid indifference to his grief.

Standing bareheaded beside a fresh mound and amidst a small field of rude crosses, headstones, boards, Terry McGonigle for the first time since the untimely death of his uncle, surrendered to his bitter grief. Unashamed, without restraint, he wept. After the tears, came once more a cold, fierce resolve which hardened his heart and aged his young face by at least four years.

A light touch upon an arm startled him. He wheeled, and found himself looking down into Sulie Prather's big, dark eyes. They were sympathetic, brimming with tears, those eyes. The freckled face held infinite pity, and the soft lips trembled. Her voice was half a sob as she said:

"Daddy would be mad if he knew I'd slipped away up here—alone. But I wanted to say good-by to you, and I likely won't be up when the wagons take the trail in the morning."

For a while, then, neither said anything. He was looking away toward the horizon, and there were little pinched lines about his eyes. His throat seemed to be cracking inside.

"I—I guess I'd better be going now," she prompted finally. "You—you'll come back sometime?"

He nodded emphatically. "Yeah, some day I'm coming back and shoot hell out of Texton."

The fierce bitterness in his voice, the look on his face caused her to stare in awe. "Good-by, Terry," she whispered after a moment.

His gaze remained on the horizon. His face lost none of its cold hardness. "Good-by, Sulie," he echoed.

Inwardly he was struggling to control his emotions, but how was she to know? Again her lips trembled. Tiptoeing suddenly, she pulled his head down to her and kissed him, then she wheeled and fled into the night. He made a move as if to call her back, but changed his mind. He relaxed and a fatalistic expression settled upon his young face. He turned and walked slowly back to town.

His hands were in his pockets, his eyes on the ground. He did not know where his feet were carrying him, did not care. He was absorbed in his own grief and somber thoughts. After a while, though, a thumping of boarding under foot told him that he was back on Main Street.

Suddenly he felt an impact. He caromed onto the dirt, almost fell. Then he righted himself and looked around. Cord Hammer was standing on the board sidewalk, gazing at him sneeringly.

The boy gunman said, "Why don't you watch out where you're going, you flea-bitten pup? You should step aside when you meet up with your betters. If you had the guts to draw I'd give you what your skunky uncle got."

Terry McGonigle should have realized that Cord Hammer had planned to shoot him in reprisal for the smashed nose and the knockdown, but in that instant the printer's-devil had no sense of reasoning. He had dearly loved his uncle, and to hear such words of defamation from young Hammer seemed to cause the boy's brain to explode. He simply went mad.

"All right, Cord Hammer," he choked out quiveringly, "I'm calling you!"

They went for their guns at the same instant, but even though surprised, Cord easily beat the gun-clumsy type-slinger by a wide margin. The report of his Colt seemed to jar the whole town.

Realizing how hopelessly he was being outsped, Terry had lunged aside. The bullet zipped past his back. Cord fired again, but Terry had tripped and was falling. It was a lucky break for him that he did so. The accident caused Hammer to miss a second time.

Terry had at last got his own gun free and into action. It bucked in his grasp and flame stabbed from its muzzle just as he struck the ground. The chance shot was lucky. It sent Cord Hammer stumbling backward.

The next instant the handsome young villain was down, and the back of his head struck hard against a rock doorstep.

Terry McGonigle scrambled to his feet and stared. Cord lay, a crumpled figure, blood running from his face and pooling on the sidewalk.

The boy now became aware that doors were flying open, that people were swarming onto the street. There were shouts, and a pounding of boots. Shadows were flitting within the areas of dim light along Main Street.

Some one yelled, "It's the McGonigle boy and Cord Hammer! Cord is down! He's been shot! Look at the gun in Terry's hand!"

And then the bellowing voice of Sledge Hammer came from farther down the street: "The damned little rat! He's murdered my son! Must've cut down on him when he wasn't looking. You all know he couldn't outgun Cord in fair fight. Get him! Don't let him escape!"

Wildly Terry McGonigle's brain worked. He told himself that if he stayed there and faced it out he would not have a chance. He was alone in the world now—had no friends in the town. Texton hated him, the lad reasoned swiftly, because he had helped his uncle combat its evils. Sledge Hammer was powerful, and violent.

"No, I wouldn't have a chance," he told himself again. "I've got to git out of this town tonight." All his hopes of joining up with the covered wagon outfit in the morning had to be abandoned.

Like a startled jackrabbit, the boy darted across the sidewalk and into a dark opening between two buildings. Behind him sounded the roar of the crowd as it took up the pursuit. Like pack-wolves eager for blood, were those excited, whisky-fired men.

It was a breath-taking game of chase which followed. Terry had got into the chaparral, and riders charged up and down through the thorny scrub in search of him. Several times he was almost trampled upon as he lay hidden in the brush. He kept eluding the pursuers, however, and finally escaped across the Rio Grande and into Mexico.

Standing on a knoll on the Chihuahua side he looked back at the lights of Texton. Like devil-eyes they were to him just now—foiled and sullen devils! He thought of all that the McGonigles had suffered back there in that country—his father murdered by a horse thief, his mother's death chiefly from shock, the gunning out of his crusader uncle, his own troubles.

"Buzzard roost!" he muttered between set teeth. "Wolf range! Hangout place for snakes and vinegarones! Town of Texton, some day I'm coming back and shoot hell out of you, and the Hammer crowd in particular. I won't be a youngun always! No siree, you'll find out!"

HALF starved, footsore and weary from many miles of hiking, Terry McGonigle put in at a little goat ranch. With a shrewd eye to business the Mexican proprietor gave him a job as herdsman—the pay, his keep. The boy learned from a passer-by that Cord Hammer had not been killed, merely face-wounded. It was bullet-shock, and the blow on the back of the head when he had struck a doorstep, that had left him sprawled as if dead.

Life to young Terry McGonigle had become one of hell—goat herding, sheep tending, swamping in cantinas, other such hateful menial labor. But he kept his chin up and endured it all without a murmur against the vicissitudes of life.

On and on he wandered, moving whenever circumstances permitted. In the tough places he saw men fight, saw men die, came in contact with many fast hombres. He took careful note of their fighting technique—and practiced, practiced, practiced!

When finally he had saved up enough money to buy a pony and a riding outfit, he turned to the cattle ranches for employment. At first he worked only as flunkey, or wrangler. But it was not long before he had become a full fledged vaquero.

In that bandit-infested country below the border a waddy was called upon to use his hardware frequently, accurately, swiftly. Terry began to gain notoriety as a cool-nerved and speedy Coltman.

At last he came into the employ of a big outfit which had for its segundo a lanky Texan who once had been a famous quick-draw ranger. By this time the one-time printer boy had come to be known as "Gunsmoke" McGonigle, a cold-eyed, taciturn waddy with lightning in both hands—steel wires for nerves.

One day he held a gun practice within a rocky bowl five miles from the home rancho. He finished fanning empty a six-shooter, then turned. He started when he saw old Luke Kaley, the segundo, sitting humped on a small boulder and watching him.

McGonigle's lean face hardened, but the lanky ex-ranger smiled amiably, spat tobacco juice at a horned toad, and remarked, "That's right pert gunnin', cowboy. As slick as ever I see."

McGonigle did not reply. His face was cold and haughty. He walked over to the segundo, squatted on spurred heels, and began punching out warm shells. When he had finished reloading the gun he shoved it away, then rolled and lighted a cigarette. Finally Luke drawled with refreshing candor:

"I got sorter suspicious of you, Gunsmoke, account your slippin' away alone into the hills so frequent—so today I follered you."

Gunsmoke McGonigle said nothing, just waited for the leathery puncher to go on. Luke did so, in his own good time:

"So this is why you do it, huh? Secret gun practice. How come, rannyhan—if I may inquire?"

Another long silence. "Smoke" McGonigle liked the hard-bitten ex-ranger a great deal. Moreover, he suddenly had decided upon an experiment. And so he told his story. He told it bitterly, harshly—in all its sordid, soul-crushing detail. Told why he had studied and practiced throughout the years, to reach the ultimate in gun skill.

When the young waddy had finished, wise old Luke Kaley nodded soberly. "I think I savvy just how you feel, Smoke. Had a setup somethin' like yourn myself oncet." He closed his right eye, cocked the left brow and asked half humorously: "But why keep up the practice? Gosh, don't you figure you're gunslick enough already?"

Smoke McGonigle rose off spurred heels, with the lithe grace of a lazy cat getting up from a nap. "That's what I want to find out right now. Are you as fast with your cutter as you were while in the ranger service, Luke?" There was a strange glitter in his eyes, a queer ghost of a hard smile on his thin lips.

The old-timer grinned and scratched his uncombed head. "Waal, now I reckon the years have slowed me down some. Still, I figure I'm plenty fast enough to match the gun speed of any young squirt I run up agin." His eyes twinkled as he looked at Gunsmoke McGonigle.

The young cowboy laughed. "All right, you longhorn, get onto your feet and side me. We'll face yonder hackberry tree. I'll throw a rock high and behind me. When it clashes against the rubble we'll both draw and fire. I'm curious to see if I can beat you."

"And I'm bettin' you a 'dobie dollar you can't," challenged Luke, as he got up and moved to the young cowboy's side.

"Called!" Smoke picked up a rock. "Are you ready?"

"Let 'er buck!"

Gunsmoke McGonigle threw the stone backward. Luke's stringy body jerked into a tense crouch. The cowboy's athletic form seemed relaxed. The next instant the stone struck and the gun race was on.

McGonigle's right wrist just seemed to twitch, the thumb to flip like a released spring. His gun barked well ahead of the segundo's long-barreled forty-five. Both bullets whacked solidly into the trunk of the hackberry tree.

Luke grinned a bit sheepishly. "You beat me, all right. Guess I ain't as fast as I thought I was."

Smoke's gray eyes were hard and bright; there was an eager look on his thin-fleshed face. He thrust his right gun away, slapped the one on his left hip. This was the old frontier model Colt which he had brought out of Texton—his uncle's gun.

"Now I'll use this one; give you a chance to win your peso back." Smoke picked up another rock. "Set?"

"Turn the critter loose!"

Again a rock went hurtling, struck; again two six-shooters barked, but this time the reports came as one. Old Luke Kaley grinned broadly.

"Matched you that time, young feller."

Gunsmoke McGonigle nodded. His smile was one of complete satisfaction. "Yep, but I was shooting with my left hand, and using the long-barrelled gun."

"Meaning what?"

"Let's squat again and I'll explain."

SEATED on boulders they again rolled cigarettes. Then Gunsmoke McGonigle spoke in a matter-of-fact way: "Throwing in type when I was a kid, the constant flick-flick-flicking, gave me a fast right hand—only I didn't realize it until later. I might've been quick with a cutter even then, with a little practice. I've made a close study of this gun business, Luke, and I've eliminated a great deal of waste motion—taken the slack out of the rope, so to speak."

"Meaning?"

"Well, consider your case for instance. You, like a good many other local pistoleers, wear your Colt with the butt forward."

"Say, sprout, you can't beat the older border crossdraw!"

"Oh, yes I can; I've just done it. Does it make sense that a man can carry his right hand from right hipjoint to left hipjoint, as quick as he can flick it from thigh to butt of a cutter it's already nearly touching?"

Luke rubbed his bony chin. "N-no, I reckon it don't."

"Of course not. And now for the long-barreled guns."

"I've noticed the one you carry on the right is unusually short, and I've wondered."

"And for good reason. It's only about half as long as yours, therefore requires only half the amount of lift to clear it of leather. Split-seconds, old-timer, all these things I've worked out, but split-seconds mean the difference between life and death in a gunfight. My short gun is for speed. It has no range, but the heavy caliber lead will smash a bull down at close quarters. For longer range I use the other Colt—or a rifle."

He drew the stubby six-gun and turned it over in his hands, spoke like a scientist who has achieved something from long study: "I've filed trigger and cocking-dogs away. Now all I have to do to shoot is just flip the hammer with my thumb. Faster than cocking and triggering, eh?"

"Nothin' new there. I—"

"And the gun has no sight. That, too, has been filed off."

"Likewise old stuff."

"The holster has been cut away, leaving just enough leather to hold the six-gun secure. That shortens the length of the rise. Also, when I slap hardware my trigger finger slips right into the guard, and my thumb onto the hammer."

"Some more old stuff."

"Right again. I've studied the gun tricks of others; adopted the things that are good, added some of my own."

"What about the swivel holster?"

"No *bueno*. It's fast, but in real gun company it's suicidal. If your opponent leaps aside, which he will if he's gun-wise, you have to turn your whole body in order to bring him within your line of fire again."

"Um-m, I hadn't thought of that."

The wiry young puncher drew on his cigarette, blew smoke through his straight nose. Then he added, "I've considered my hands, too. Exercised them a lot to make them quick and sure. I figure that a master gunman's fingers should be like a master musician's."

Old Luke eyed him queerly, the while tugging absently at the long mustache that horned down each side of his bony chin. "Gunsmoke McGonigle, danged if your talk ain't plumb revealin'. You've been a sort of fanatic about this gun-training business, ain't you? A feller would get the idee that you've studied and practiced to become a regular Colt hellion."

Smoke nodded soberly. "And such I did. I swore I'd go back to Texton some day and shoot hell out of the whole place. I knew I'd have to be mighty well prepared, for the Hammers, and others, are fast with their hardware. Texton is tough, Luke—very, very tough. But so am I—now."

There was a grim smile on his lips. He was looking away toward the border, and once more the gray eyes were hard and shiny.

He resumed slowly, "Now, though, I see things different. I realize that the town ain't all bad. Mostly good people there, but the bad ones keep 'em buffaloed."

"And so?"

"I aim to use my gun learning only to help the decent element clean up the town."

A gleam of approval showed in Luke Kaley's hard brown eyes. "Your first idee was the kind that makes outlaws and killers, Gunsmoke McGonigle. Now, though, you're talkin' sense." He spat at the dozing horned toad again. Squinted one eye, he said calculatingly, "If need be, I can rustle us a couple ranger badges."

"Us?"

Luke grinned, jerked his head in a nod. "I been honin' to go back to the old stompin' ground for a right smart while. Never should have left it to take on this here job that promised so much. Besides, I'd just love to help do some cleanin' up around Texton. A mighty good pal of mine was drygulched down there oncet."

Smoke's teeth flashed in a smile—a startling row of white in a berry-brown face. He thrust out a slim hand that was as strong as spring steel. "Shake, podner! We're hitting the trail for the Rio in the morning." Then once more he turned his face eastward. The gray eyes glinted and a devilish ghost of a smile played about the thin lips. In an undertone he said, "Look out, Texton, and the Hammer crowd in particular. We're coming!"

CHAPTER III

SATAN'S STAMPING GROUND

IT was high noon of a fine spring day when Terry McGonigle and Luke Kaley splashed their way across the shallow Rio Grande and mounted the shore on the Texas side. They drew rein, hipped around in their saddles and looked back. Somber were the stretches of chaparral, dreary were the gray hills that rose in the distance. Both men were glad at last to be out of Chihuahua. They straightened themselves in their saddles and gazed ahead; they glanced at each other and both grinned.

"Seems sorter good to be back in old Texas, huh?" observed Luke.

"It sure does. If it wasn't I know doggoned well I'm going to have plenty of trouble over here, I'd feel as

cheerful as that mocking-bird which is spilling notes all over the top of that big cottonwood over yonder."

Luke chuckled and twisted an end of his long mustache. They touched spurs gently to their broncs and went on up the trail.

After a while Luke remarked, "Gosh, look at the birds!"

McGonigle's eyes had been fixed moodily upon the ground, as he thought of the situation awaiting him in Texton. Now he lifted his gaze to the sky. A big flock of pigeons was coming out of the east, and rocketing toward Mexico. Snow-white, they showed against the blue of the heavens.

"Purty, ain't they?" said Luke.

"Yeah, but they haven't got much gumption. They're leaving a dog-goned sight better country than they're going into. They ought to turn around and head back." The pigeons flew on, and disappeared in the distance. After a moment Gunsmoke McGonigle said in a detached way, "For ten years I've been telling myself that I hated Texas, but now I know I don't—that I never did, really."

But when a little later they sat their mounts on a rise and looked down upon the town of Texton, bitterness and sad memories returned to the young cowboy's heart. He took a deep breath, said between lips that were drawn tightly over his teeth, "Well, there she is, podner. Texton, hell-hole, wolf den, breeding place for snakes and skunks—unless she's changed in the last ten years."

"Maybe she has changed—and maybe them Hammers ain't even in these parts any more."

"You can bet they are," Smoke said grimly. "They owned the biggest spread in the country, and just about rodded things, both on the range and in town. Yeh, they're still here, all right. They wouldn't leave such a nice setup. They were grabbing right and left, they more than likely own about half the country by this time."

Old Luke twisted his mustache and studied the town. A nest of mingled plank and adobe structures, it sprawled within a flat little valley. Chaparral and mesquite surrounded the place.

Smoke McGonigle's eyes were hard, his tanned young face moody, as he stared upon Texton. After a while he said musingly, "That little knoll over there to the north of town—that's the public cemetery, Texton's boot-hill. My uncle is buried there. He was planted among thieves, renegades, and gunmen, because I didn't have the money to pay for a decent burial. Some day I'll have the remains dug up and taken over yonder." He nodded toward a peaceful looking range of rolling hills. "My father and my mother rest there."

"Shucks, Smoke, forget it," Luke told him gently. "I wouldn't think of disturbin' that grave if I was you. What's there is only dust and clay, you know. If what we all like to believe is true, your uncle and your parents are already together, on another range. The bodies they occupied while on this earth don't matter."

Smoke said nothing. He touched his mount with the rowels and headed down the slope.

Throughout the years McGonigle had thought frequently of little Consuelo Prather, had thought of her tenderly. He recalled how they had parted—that childish, impulsive kiss, her bitter sobbing as she had fled into the gloom. At the moment it had seemed to him that she was his only friend in all the world. He wondered if she were still in Texton. Wondered what she was like, grown to young womanhood.

As he and Luke entered town his eyes eagerly sought out the false front of the big plank building which had been her father's store. As his gaze riveted upon the sign painted across that frame face a tension seized him and involuntarily he

pulled to a stop. The familiar old sign was gone, and in its place was one which read:

HAMMER'S GENERAL STORE

"And the Hammers gobbled that, too," the grim-faced waddy mumbled.

"Huh? What you sayin'?" asked Luke, but Smoke paid no heed. They moved slowly on.

THIS big store always had been a favorite hangout for loafers. The large porch offered shade, and there were benches against the wall. Moreover, out front was a giant cottonwood, and beneath this was the town pump and watering trough. That mossy trough, and the porch edge, and the benches all were worn and knife-nicked.

Gunsmoke McGonigle saw at once that there was a small crowd at the old loafing place. It was Saturday afternoon, and a good many people were in town. Men eyed him and Luke Kaley curiously as they fox-trotted their broncs along the street.

Bitterness, a flare of devilish recklessness carried McGonigle straight toward Hammer's store. Duke Brandon, owner of the Crazy Horse Saloon, and others of the Hammer crowd were there. He was curious to see if they would recognize him; what they would do if they did know him. Several of those men had been in the mob which had chased him into Mexico ten years before. Well, just let them try to chase him now!

As he and Luke swung down and left their reins trailing over the hitchrail, the wiry young cowboy received another shock; one that jarred him to the very toes of his glove-fitting boots. A girl and a big, handsome man came out of the store, each with an armful of packages. The couple were smiling, and lively banter was passing back and forth between the two. Gunsmoke McGonigle's heart went a little sick. The girl, he recognized as Consuelo Prather. The man was Cord Hammer. What were those one-time enemies doing in each other's company? And apparently in such happy mood!

The years hadn't made a great deal of change in young Hammer, for he had been practically grown the last time McGonigle had seen him. He now had an ugly scar across his left cheek—hated memento of the gunfight with Terry McGonigle ten years before. What young McGonigle was to find out later, was that Cord Hammer was supersensitive about that scar.

In the first place, it humiliated him because it was evidence that he had been "taken" by his adversary—a gangling kid who knew practically nothing about a six-gun. In the second place, Cord believed that the scar marred his good looks, and he had always been quite vain about that arrogantly handsome face of his.

Gunsmoke McGonigle had found himself suddenly confronted by the couple. Now they and he stopped abruptly. His eyes and Sulie Prather's met and held. Hers took on a strangely intent light. Had she recognized him? Cord Hammer was staring, too, but his gaze was merely curious and coldly commanding. McGonigle exulted inwardly. He had been but fourteen when he had fled Texton. He had known that the passing years had wrought a very great change in him. He had hoped that he would not be recognized when he returned, and now it seemed that the hope was realized.

The queerly intent look was gone from Sulie's eyes. Apparently she had failed to recognize him. McGonigle mumbled, "Pardon me, folks," and stepped aside. The couple ignored him further, and went on to a buckboard. They loaded in the packages, mounted to the seat, and drove away, Cord Hammer at the reins. As the buckboard departed McGonigle heard a tinkling little laugh, and he cursed inwardly as he saw the way in which Sulie Prather was looking up into her companion's face. Again he asked

himself how in the world it was that they were together like that—friends—even lovers, perhaps.

"Life sure is queer," he thought glumly.

What a beautiful girl Sulie Prather had become! Gone were the freckles, the pigtails, the skinny limbs. Her cheeks now were soft and clear. Her hair was bobbed, wavy, a rich chestnut-brown. Her trim figure had the beautiful, firm roundness of splendid young womanhood. Her eyes were large and dark and luminous.

"She's going to help him prepare the ranch house for that fiesta tonight," McGonigle heard one of the loafers say.

"Seems they're right stuck on each other," another observed. "Surprisin', too, they were such enemies when kids."

The first loafer then made a smutty remark. Some of the others laughed. Anger swept like wildfire through McGonigle's breast. A few quick strides that caused bootheels to crack against planking and spur rowels to ring, and he was before the loose-mouthed fellow. As the man looked up into the glittering gray eyes a look of mingled wonder and dismay flashed across his gross face.

McGonigle slapped a brown hand onto the fellow's shoulder, twisted the steel-spring fingers into the unbuttoned collar, and jerked the man erect. It was a surprising display of strength for one of Smoke's size. The cowboy weighed but a hundred and sixty pounds. His words seemed to pop from his tight lips as he said:

"Fella, I ain't used to hearing smutty remarks passed about a nice young lady like that. Eat your dirty words, or I'll slam them right down your throat, and some teeth along with 'em." He remembered the scoundrel from his boyhood days—a gunny for the Hammer-Brandon crowd.

THE scoundrel blinked in amazement, and then his heavy face went dark red in anger. With a snarl he tore the hand from his collar and struck. McGonigle's move was as quick as that of an alert bobcat as he sidestepped. The blow slid harmlessly over his right shoulder. He chugged out his right fist in a blow that traveled only a few inches. It smashed against the man's loose lips and sent him staggering back over worn bootheels. The next instant the two men were mixing it in a furious slugfest.

The other men of that little crowd all had started to their feet. Old Luke Kaley slapped a bony hand to his holster and warned, "Don't nobody get funny idees! I'm backin' my podner's play! Stand back, you mosshorns, give 'em room and let 'em have 'er out!"

They glanced at him, then gave back and fixed their attention upon the two combatants.

Smoke McGonigle's opponent outweighed him by a healthy margin, but the lithe young puncher fought like a buzzsaw. He recognized in this loose-mouthed ruffian one of Sledge Hammer's pet gunmen. Moreover, the remark which the fellow had just made about Sulie Prather was still burning within the cowboy's brain. He smashed a blow to the nose, bringing a gushing flow of crimson. The man snorted a red spray, roared in anger, ducked his head and charged.

The sheer ferocity of that rush carried Gunsmoke McGonigle backward, fists flailing. A blow came out of nowhere, a wild swing with no science or sense of direction behind it—but it landed to the face, nevertheless. McGonigle went hurtling backward, slammed hard against the forewall of the store. A howl of encouragement went up from the crowd. Duke Brandon, sleek owner of the Crazy Horse Saloon, yelped excitedly:

"That's the stuff, Tesro, knock his head off!"

And Tesro tried. Bloody lips grinning, little eyes gleaming fiercely, he rushed again.

Gunsmoke McGonigle's wiry body seemed to flip like a released spring. That lithe form went hurtling forward, faded aside at the last split second. A big fist fairly whistled past his head. His own right arm pistoned and his rock-hard right fist sank almost wrist deep into the other man's belly. The fellow let out a *"Wumph!"* and jackknifed suddenly at the middle. His eyes were bugged as he doubled; his face was pasty and contorted in pain.

McGonigle spun on the balls of his feet, whipped a left to the jaw. The next instant he was beating his foe backward with a veritable hailstorm of short, jolting blows.

He stopped suddenly, then his whole wiry body threw itself into a flying right. The crack of fist against the loose jaw could be heard on the other side of the street. The Fork H man was spun half around. He seemed to dive off the porch edge, and the heavy body struck with a scuffing thud.

Gunsmoke McGonigle strode swiftly to the trough. He dipped up a hatful of water, came back and splashed it into the bloody, bruised face. The ruffian gasped and spluttered. McGonigle collared him erect.

"Eat the dirty words you said, or I'll slam you again!" he threatened.

Again the fellow snarled and pulled away, and this time he cut a hand toward his six-gun.

Instantly Smoke McGonigle was upon him. The waddy's Colt forty-five snapped from leather and flicked downward. The blue barrel cracked against Tesro's knuckles. With a howl of pain the fellow let go his six-shooter and it fell to the ground. McGonigle kicked it away.

"All right! All right!" Tesro now spoke hurriedly. "I—I'll eat crow! I take it all back! I'm sorry I said it!"

"Get out!" McGonigle ordered. "Plumb out of town!"

The fellow nodded submissively. He retrieved his six-gun, then went clumping away toward a hitchrack, wiping blood and muttering between swollen lips. McGonigle holstered his gun and stepped back onto the porch.

Duke Brandon now came forward and confronted the cowboy. He was a slender, immaculate man in "store clothes." The face was cold and haughty, the eyes black and full of the devil.

His voice was challenging as he said, "Who're you, cowboy — you and this long-legged maverick — to come here and try to run this town?"

Once more fierce, reckless anger swirled within Gunsmoke McGonigle. Here was one of Sledge Hammer's closest allies, one of the men responsible for the murder of Mort McGonigle, and the burning of the little printing establishment ten years ago. This man had been at the forefront of the mob which had chased a desperate kid through the chaparral and into Mexico. One of the crowd that had been responsible for all Terry McGonigle had suffered.

Smoke's thin lips twisted in a sneering grin. Mockingly he said, "That long-legged jasper is one of the old she-cougar's brothers. Me, I'm the wolf with the wire tail." Then the lips went flat, the mouth took on a mean droop and he added between set teeth, "Keep your nose out of my business, hombre, or it might get caved in."

A TENSE silence fell. Men began to clear back. Duke Brandon was not one to take such talk as this, and he was a flash with his hardware. At first, however, he elected to use a fist rather than a gun. He was possessed of a volcanic temperament, and now he cursed and struck out impulsively. McGonigle elbowed the blow aside, carried his fist on and landed it to the chin.

It was a short blow, but it sent Brandon stumbling back. The haughty, immaculate dive owner ordinarily was distinctively averse to fist-fighting, considering it beneath his dignity. It had been a wild flare

of temper which had caused him to swing that one blow.

Now with hell flaring in his black eyes he spat out, "Damn you, cowboy, draw!"

His right hand swept back an edge of his black coat and seized the handle of a pistol, but the weapon froze halfway out of its holster. A catlike leap, and Gunsmoke McGonigle was boring the saloon man's belly with the muzzle of a very short Colt. How that gun had got into the brown fist was a mystery to some of the onlookers. They had not seen the hand move.

Carrying the slim gambler-gunman on the muzzle of his forty-five, Smoke McGonigle shoved Duke Brandon backward to the wall and pinned him there. And now he told Brandon—the whole crowd—plenty. When he was through he shoved the gun away, wheeled, and he and Luke Kaley went high-heeling down the street.

Old Luke chuckled. "That was tellin' 'em off, cowboy!" But the next moment he was frowning worriedly. "Don't you think, though, it's bad business, startin' right in with a scrap?"

"I wasn't going to let the blabbermouth get away with his dirty talk," Smoke retorted. "That was Sulie Prather, the girl you've heard me speak of so often. Besides," he added grimly, "we might as well show our brands right in the beginning. The best way to handle toughs is to be tough yourself—just a little bit tougher than the other fella."

They went up to where once had stood Mort McGonigle's printshop. The lot had been sold by the creditor-bank. On it now stood an adobe building across the face of which was painted:

HAMMER'S DANCE HALL

Young McGonigle was sad and bitter as he turned away.

He was soon to learn that Cord Hammer and Consuelo Prather had not yet left Texton. He and Luke were passing a building when suddenly the couple came out, their arms again loaded with packages. Evidently they had put in here for fiesta supplies which the Hammer store did not carry. Once more all hands stopped.

Once more Gunsmoke McGonigle found Sulie Prather studying him intently. Cord Hammer was gazing steadily at him, too, and he wondered if the man had heard of the trouble which had occurred down the street a short time before. The cold blue eyes and the hard face were utterly inscrutable. Again Smoke mumbled an apology and stepped aside.

As Cord and Sulie were about to drive away in the buckboard the girl inadvertently knocked a package from the seat and it fell to the ground. Instantly Smoke went to retrieve it for her. Sulie sprang down quickly, but he was first to reach the package. As he handed it to her their eyes met and held once more. A slight flush swept into her soft cheeks. She murmured her thanks.

McGonigle glanced at Cord Hammer again and he saw that the man's face was no longer inscrutable. It was red with anger now, and the eyes were blazing. Evidently he was a very jealous fellow—and Gunsmoke McGonigle was not at all hard for a girl to look at.

"Better mind your own business, stranger," Hammer snapped, "and don't try to get fresh with the ladies."

A devilish impulse seized Smoke McGonigle then. His gray eyes danced and a small, tantalizing smile curled his lips. He put out a hand to Consuelo Prather, and apparently under the spell of a strange, irresistible fascination she placed her palm against his own. He helped her back into the buckboard. Her gesture had been an unconsciously trusting one, just as if she knew him to be the friend of her childhood. Or *did* she know?

Cord Hammer muttered something under his breath and made a move as if to get out of the vehicle. But the horses had already been turned away from the rail and now

Sulie reached over and shook the lines. The mettlesome team lunged into the collars and the next instant the wheels were spinning. Smoke could see that the girl and the man were arguing. They both looked back. Hammer's expression was ominous, but Sulie smiled.

CHAPTER IV

COYOTES ON THE PROWL

GUNSMOKE McGONIGLE went to see Andrew Silsby, an old lawyer who had been a close friend of his publisher uncle. The white-haired, apple-cheeked little man did not recognize him, was surprised and delighted when Smoke disclosed his identity.

They had a long chat. "The Hammers were known only as lead-slinging range gobblers in the old days," Silsby told the cowboy, "but now they're suspected of just about every crime on the calendar."

"What happened to the old Prather store?" Smoke asked curiously.

"Belongs to the Hammers now. Prather decided to try ranching again, so he traded it for a piece of Hammer range. Reckon they figured they could euchre him out of it later on—like they did once before. Funny thing, Prather was the only person who never believed the Hammers were the scamps who stole him poor on that first ranch.

"The poor fellow is dead now. Passed away of slow fever. Sulie was away in school, but came back and took charge of the spread. The Hammers have the girl and her mother at their mercy, but haven't squeezed because young Hammer wants Sulie. On her part, she seems to've forgotten the past and fallen for Cord."

Gunsmoke McGonigle was embittered by the news. He growled, "I'll get the deadwood on the Hammers, if it's the last thing I ever do."

They were startled by the entrance of a heavy-set, square-jawed man. "I'm no eavesdropper," he stated bluntly. "Happened I saw the stranger come in here and wanted to ask him some questions about that ruckus he had. I couldn't help hearing what you two said."

"That's all right, John," the lawyer assured him. "Terry, meet John Clants, the new sheriff. The old one was murdered in the breaks, by rustlers supposedly. John, this is Terry McGonigle." Then he said to the cowboy, "We'd better confide in him, son—since he partly knows anyway." And Terry did.

John Clants professed hatred of the Hammers. "They'd turn their dirty hands to anything to make easy money—horse thieving, cow rustling, smuggling, land grabbing, running dives, dealing in crooked politics—yes, anything. I'd give my right arm to be able to land 'em!"

"I'd like to help you do it," Smoke told him.

The sheriff stared at him, said slowly, "Maybe you can." He stroked his chin, adding, "You can best do it by keeping your identity secret, for to announce who you really are would mean certain gun trouble, pronto. We don't want any bloodshed if we can help it. So for the time being suppose you just become—let us say, Smoky Davis, huh?"

The cowboy nodded. "Suits me." They talked on for a while, formed some tentative plans. Then Smoke went out to find his lanky pal.

A short time later, as the two waddies sat together in a Chinese restaurant, Smoke's lips twisted in a mysterious smile and he remarked softly, "Luke, I feel like partying tonight, so I guess I'll take in a fiesta."

"Wha-at?"

"You guessed it—out at the Fork H ranch."

"My gosh, are you loco? Should you be recognized out there—"

"Yeah, I know, but I'm betting I won't—and I just can't resist the

temptation to go to that jamboree."

"Well, if you're bound to go I'll ride with you," Luke told him after some vain argument, and the old-timer wouldn't budge from that decision.

Between eight and nine o'clock that night the two cowboys left Texton and hit the trail for the Hammer ranch, ten miles away. They rode leisurely, and it was an hour before they came within sight of the place. They drew rein on a barren rise and sat their mounts there for a while, gazing down upon the spread.

The main building was a great, sprawling, Spanish-style structure. They could see varicolored Japanese lanterns scattered about the huge patio. Blotches of shadow told them that a great many saddled horses and rigs stood about the ranch house. The night was very still, and strains of music drifted to them, even at this distance. The bunkhouse was lighted, too, and halfway between this building and the main one, men could be seen moving about a barbecue pit.

"When the Hammers throw a party they do 'er up brown," observed hatchet-faced old Luke Kaley.

The two waddies moved on. As they came onto the ranch premises, they suddenly paused. They were close to a cagelike structure now, situated not far from the huge barn. They could hear a fluttering, and a croaking. They rode closer, craned their necks and peered. "Pigeons," remarked Gunsmoke McGonigle. "Now we know where those birds we saw today came from."

"The Fork H outfit must be mighty fond of squabs and pigeon pot-pies," said Luke. "There's a goodly flock of them little critters in there."

They rode away, and as they did so Luke spoke softly from a corner of his mouth: "Hey, Smoke! That little shack there about twenty steps from the pigeon-house! Somebody has been watching us through a winder! See?"

McGonigle did see——the blurred shadow of a hatted head, behind the glass. "Humph!" he muttered. "It was as if the jigger had been put there to guard the birds! Those pigeons must be especial pets of the Hammers, podner."

But the feathered creatures were soon forgotten. Gunsmoke McGonigle and his lanky friend had arrived at the patio wall. They rose in their stirrups and looked over its top. The music had stopped. A recess had been called in the open-air dancing, and the guests were chatting, sitting, strolling about. Some were sipping drinks.

"All right, here I go," Smoke said in an undertone, and as lithely as a bobcat he swung himself to the top of the wall.

"And here I come right behind you," chuckled old Luke Kaley.

They dropped down within the patio and stood side by side for a moment listening. Then the ex-ranger said, "Well, we're in the wolf's den, so we might as well gourd head, as the feller says, and see what the rest of it is like."

Smoke bobbed his Stetson in a nod. He moved his two guns up and down, loosening them in the holsters, and then he led the way.

THE so-called patio was nothing more nor less than a large extent of "grounds," surrounded by an adobe wall. Sledge Hammer's wife—long since passed on—had been a great lover of flowers. Now the vast garden and its growth were carefully tended by the Mexican couple who kept house for the Hammers, and did the cooking for the whole ranch.

Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley moved along a winding walk that was hedged with flowering shrubbery. The scent of the blossoms was sweet in their nostrils. They came to the edge of an opening, and there Smoke halted short, pulling Luke to a stop with him. People were strolling all about, but McGonigle had eyes for only one person—a girl. It was Consuelo Prather. She was alone, wandering among the flowers.

"Wait here," he told Luke in a low voice. And then he hurried toward the girl, propelled by an excited eagerness, his heart pounding queerly.

Again he stopped. Although he was within a few yards of her she had not noticed him as yet. She turned now and looked up at the moon. Its light flooded down into her face, showing it clearly. He saw pensive sadness there. Then her eyes turned toward Mexico, and as she gazed abstractedly her slender fingers slowly picked a rose to pieces. McGonigle wondered if by chance she was thinking of him, of the desperate kid who had fled across the Rio Grande ten years before.

He pressed quickly on. She became conscious of his presence now and turned. They looked at each other in silence. She leaned toward him, peering. He gulped. Had she recognized him? Her brow was a little troubled. Her lips parted as if she would speak, but at that instant came interruption —in the form of Cord Hammer.

Cord took one of the girl's hands protectingly, and she smiled up into his face. His cold eyes were fixed upon Gunsmoke McGonigle in a hard stare.

"What're you doing here, cowboy? And who are you, anyway?"

Smoke showed white teeth in a smile. "I'm just a roaming cowboy from Mexico. I thought I could maybe get me a job here."

Cord Hammer evinced almost startled interest. "Mexico, eh?" he spoke softly. "And just what led you to believe that you might get a job at the Fork H?"

"Fella on the other side suggested I might. Said the Fork H is the biggest spread in these parts. And who're you, mister?"

"I'm Cord Hammer."

"Oh, then you're just the fella I wanted to see."

"No, you want to see my dad. He's the big boss around here. Come on, I'll take you to him. Excuse me for a while, won't you, Sulie?"

As they moved away Smoke glanced at Luke Kaley, who stood half hidden within the shadows. The old ex-ranger looked worried, but Smoke grinned confidently.

"You happen to know Miss Prather?" Cord asked. "I noticed you were talking to her."

"No, I hadn't even spoke to her. I was just going to ask the young lady where I might find the ranch owner. I guess you heard about the little trouble I had in town today. A fella made a slighting remark about the girl and I—"

"Yes, I heard all about that, and I want to thank you for what you did. You see, Miss Prather is my girl."

He stressed the last words warningly and gave the cowboy a hard look. Smoke said innocently, "Oh, engaged, huh?"

"Well—practically. I very nearly fired Tesro for what he said." But his tone was not that of one deeply concerned.

They found Sledge Hammer busy with some papers in his office. He wheeled around in his swivel chair as they entered. Gunsmoke McGonigle went cold and iron-hard all through as he gazed once more into the coppery eyes of the man who had slain his uncle, ten years before. The fellow had changed very little, except that his hair was frosty around the edges.

"Dad," said Cord, "here's a ranny from Mexico, who says he was told over there he might get a job here. He's the quick-draw jigger who made Tesro eat crow, and who told Duke Brandon where to get off."

The elder Hammer's leonine face showed quickened interest. Just as his son had done, he said softly, "Oh-h! Mexico, huh? Sit down, er—" He raised thick eyebrows inquiringly.

"You can call me Smoky—Smoky Davis."

THEN began much subtle innuendo between Gunsmoke McGonigle and the Hammers. The keen-eyed,

keen-witted cowboy soon guessed that they were in connivance with some crooked gang in Mexico, and that they thought he might be a messenger from their allies. Their questions indicated as much.

"Just who was it told you that you might hook up here?" asked Sledge.

Smoke answered as he poured tobacco into a troughed paper, "Oh, I don't just remember. Somebody over there, though."

Cord and Sledge exchanged glances. The answer might be calculated to shield a kingsnake, even from them. Silence for a moment, while they studied him keenly. Then Cord blurted, "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

A little shock jarred Gunsmoke McGonigle, but he allowed none of the excitement to show on his face. His slender fingers were perfectly steady as he twirled the cigarette. "Maybe," he answered casually, "if you've spent much time in Mexico. I was practically brought up down there."

"Yeah? Just where? For what outfits have you worked?"

His gray eyes dared them, and he said with an acid smile, "Nowhere in particular, and I worked for a number of outfits."

Again Cord and his father exchanged glances. The cowboy was cautious, all right. This caution impressed them more than if he had talked freely. Experienced buscaderos were as wary as lobos.

The innuendo continued. All was very vague. Gunsmoke McGonigle saw that the subtlety was beginning to irk the Hammers. They could not come out and openly ask him the things they wanted to know without exposing their own hands, and they were not sure of him. He was so elusive, so vague. After a while Sledge Hammer said:

"We're mighty careful who we hire on this ranch, cowboy. A rider must have references." He stressed the last word, then peered at the lean face before him.

Once more Smoke McGonigle smiled mysteriously. "I'm sure you'd find me just the kind of man you want," he spoke softly.

Again the two Hammers exchanged glances—baffled, half-angry looks, this time—then they stared at him anew. His heart beat fast. It seemed that they must see something familiar in his face, that they were striving to place him. He felt just about as comfortable as if he had been sitting over the mouth of a snakes' den. But outwardly he was cool, wholly unperturbed. Now, although he pretended not to notice, he became aware of a presence just outside a window. Was it his pal, or one of the Fork H men?

He almost sighed audibly in relief when after a moment Cord Hammer said, "You may go out and join the guests if you like, cowboy. Dad and I will have a little talk, and I'll see you later."

Smoke nodded, got up and walked out. Cord looked at Sledge and asked, "Well, what do you think?"

The burly ranchman shook his big, bushy thatched head and growled, "Damned if I know what to think. He's an eely one, that jasper. If he's one of Quincey's men he certainly knows how to work smoothly. We won't take him on unless we get his brand absolutely right. Keep your eye on him. Might be a good idea to have some of the boys trail him away from here tonight to see where he goes, what he does."

Cord Hammer got up. He said flatly, "If that jigger is all right we can certainly use him, for he has what it takes. If he isn't all right he's mighty dangerous to us, so—we'll have to get rid of him."

"Correct!" Sledge agreed emphatically, then turned back to his desk Cord hitched up his pants and went out.

Meanwhile Gunsmoke McGonigle had found Sulie Prather again. The music struck up and he asked her for a dance. She gave him a roving, disinterested glance and murmured con-

sent. She was very cool to him throughout the dance. He felt hurt at first. Had she showed no appreciation for what had happened in town on her account?

And then he said to himself, "But maybe she doesn't know. She heard me say I was from Mexico, was looking for a job here. Maybe she thinks I'm just another border hopper. If she only knew who I really am!" He could not tell her, for two reasons. First, there was no opportunity to speak with her privately. Second, she might be in love with the crook whom he had sworn to land, so he must keep his identity secret from her for the time being.

When they had finished the dance, Cord Hammer stepped up to them. There was a look of disapproval on his bold face as he stared at Smoke.

"There's no place for you here right now," he clipped off coldly. "Maybe there will be later on. We'll see. Good night."

Smoke nodded silently again and turned away. Old Luke soon joined him. Just as they were fading into the shadows, the cowboy looked back and saw Consuelo Prather gazing at him past Cord Hammer's right arm as the couple waltzed. There was a queer, strained expression on her face.

"Either she knows me, or is doing her doggonedest to remember where she has ever seen me before," Smoke mumbled.

"I was afraid you was steppin' right into a trap when you went into the house," Luke told him. "I stationed myself at a winder, so's to be ready to help you, should trouble bust loose. What were you all talkin' about?" Smoke told him, and the leathery old puncher chuckled.

AS they were leaving they again passed close to the pigeon-house, and again they stopped. Once more a human shadow appeared in the nearby shack—in the doorway, this time. The man evidently realized that his presence had been noticed, for now he came boldly forward. He spoke in broken English:

"The señores weel not distorb the peegeons, pliz. Eet ees the laying season—and some have yong, w'ich do not do well when excite."

"Um, pets, huh?" observed Smoke.

"The espacial pets of the Señores Hammer. And now—*buenos noches, vaqueros.*"

"So long," they called, and rode away. Luke mumbled while twirling an end of his mustache. "Pigeons! Huh! Queer hobby for men like them. But some bad uns are that way. I knowed a callous murderer oncet, who loved all kinds of pets."

Gunsmoke McGonigle said nothing. He had forgotten the pigeons for a moment and was giving his whole attention to something else. "Luke," he confided after a while, "we're being followed."

"Eh? What's that?" The ex-ranger peered behind him. Then he muttered, "Doggoned if we ain't!"

"Maybe they're just trailing us out of suspicion, but I don't care to have them on our tails when we get into the lonely breaks. We'll give them the slip."

And this they did—by simply wheeling aside in a great, shadowy coulee and hiding amidst some giant rocks. The last they saw of the band, the horsemen were topping a rim, nearly half a mile away.

Smoke chuckled and said, "Riding hard, thinking we're doing the same, and hoping to bring us into sight again soon."

The two cowboys kept away from the trail during the remainder of the ride, for they were afraid they might bump right into the Fork H men on their way back to the home ranch.

It was very late when the two waddies arived on the outskirts of Texton. Nearly the whole town seemed asleep now. Only a scattered few lights were glowing.

Gunsmoke McGonigle led the way up onto Texton's boot-hill. He stopped

amidst the little field of crosses, headstones and headboards, got down. Hat in hand he stood in silence, gazing upon the grave of his Uncle Mort, while mingled sad and bitter memories stormed through his breast. How vividly did he recall when he had stood here like this ten years ago! Then, little Sulie Prather had come to him. She had kissed him, and fled sobbing into the dark. Now, it was Sulie who needed sympathy and help, although apparently she did not realize the fact.

Gunsmoke McGonigle looked up at his lanky, leathery pal. He said huskily, "Podner, there lies a good man—Mortimer McGonigle, editor and publisher. A fella who was mighty out of place in this town of crime. He was murdered by Sledge Hammer, in cold blood. I swore it here before, I swear it again now—Sledge Hammer is going to pay."

His voice had been low, deep, just a bit shaky with mingled emotions. Luke Kaley felt out of place up there at that moment; that his presence was an obtrusion upon the sad privacy of his young friend's thoughts and feelings. He mumbled gently, "See you at the hotel, kid," and turned his mount away.

Smoke McGonigle stopped him. "Take my bronc, too. I'll walk down into town. Sort of want to be alone for a while out here in the night, and think."

"Shore, kid, I savvy." Luke picked up his friend's bridle reins and rode away into the gloom.

As Gunsmoke McGonigle stood alone there in the night, ruminating somberly, in the back of his head he formed a plan to have the remains of his uncle exhumed and placed beside those of his parents, at the first opportunity.

As young McGonigle went slowly down the hill he was still in a dark mood. He passed the place where once had stood his uncle's printing establishment. He stared sadly at the spot where the silvery-haired publisher had lain in death that tragic day. A moment later he came to the corner where he and young Cord Hammer had engaged in the gunfight which had sent him—Terry McGonigle—away into Mexico, a fugitive. He smiled grimly as he recalled how he had bested the bulldozing young villain, how he had marked the lobo whelp for life.

CHAPTER V

Holsters of Hate

THE gloomy young waddy was nearing Duke Brandon's Crazy Horse Saloon, when he became aware that someone was approaching him, that boot soles were scuffing the hard walkway a few yards ahead. He looked up, saw a man staggering along; a man who apparently was very drunk. The fellow's legs were wobbly. His head was down, and he was singing in a low, maudlin, untuneful voice.

The fellow drew a bandanna and began trumpeting his nose. He passed within arm's reach of McGonigle without giving the waddy any apparent notice. Smoke peered at him, but couldn't see the face, since it was almost completely buried in the bandanna.

The man reeled by. McGonigle was about to drop back into his mood of gloomy abstraction—but lurched to a halt and stiffened as he felt the muzzle of a gun ruthlessly prod his back. The man who had played drunk, snarled in a whisper, "Don't move, or I'll blow you apart!"

In swift succession his two guns were plucked from their holsters and flung aside. The gruff voice then ordered, "All right, along the alley—and keep your hands down. Somebody might see us."

Smoke dared now to look over one shoulder. Still he could not see the

features of the other man. The fellow had pulled a black neckerchief up over his nose.

"Say, what is this?" McGonigle growled.

"Shut up! And move, pronto!" The other jabbed hard with the six-gun. The experienced young rider of the danger trails had all kinds of respect for a shooting-iron, and so without further protest he followed instructions.

There was a wide opening between two long store buildings. Down this the cowboy moved, prodded by the hard muzzle of his captor's six-shooter. They arrived at a back corner, and there Gunsmoke McGonigle again halted short. In the rear of the nearest building three men stood waiting, and their faces too were masked by neckscarfs.

A small, chilling shock went through McGonigle. There was ominous portent in the aspect of those three masked men standing there in the gloom—sinister shadows! The one behind him said, "Well, here he is, boys." He shoved his prisoner roughly toward the waiting three.

A hulking fellow moved a step forward, asked in a muffled voice, "Cowboy, do you know what's going to happen to you?"

Smoke said nothing. His lips closed more tightly. Obviously this man's voice, like that of the first one, was disguised—apparently by filling part of the mouth with a neckerchief. The hulking one went on:

"We don't like you, feller—don't like the way you've started in cuttin' a wide swath in this town. We're suspicious of you. We'd like to know who you really are, and what you're up to around here. We know you wouldn't come clean w i t h o u t a damned good dressing down, so we aim to beat the livin' hell out of you —for that reason, and just for personal satisfaction. W h e n we're through you'll talk."

McGonigle made a lunge. His right hand streaked for the holstered gun at the man's side. But the fellow had been expecting some such move. He let out a low, harsh laugh, sidestepped nimbly, swung a big fist. Smoke got away from it. And now all four of the masked men rushed him.

Gunsmoke McGonigle dared not break away and run, for the attackers were snarling threats to shoot him if he did so—to gun-slug him if he yelled for help. The waddy kicked backward, heard a gasp of pain as the sharp boot heel sank into a groin. He struck out with his left fist, felt lips grind against teeth. The fight became a wild, fast mixup.

McGonigle told himself grimly that he was in for a beating; that he could scarcely hope to win out against such terrific odds. But he was determined to deal them all the punishment he could before they knocked him cold.

He ducked a blow. One fell upon his back and sent him lunging against the hulking man. They clenched. McGonigle kicked out his right foot, brought it back. The sharp rowel of his spur drove into the hard flesh of his immediate antagonist, then ripped upward.

THE fellow groaned in agony and dropped his arms. Again Smoke reached for the holstered six-shooter. A fist clubbed him on the side of the neck, paralyzing the muscles for an instant. He was hurled aside, and he brought up with a loud thud against the rear wall of the store building.

Another attacker swung at him now. He wagged his head and felt bony knuckles slide past his right cheek. The man let out a loud "Ouch!" as his fist banged against planking.

McGonigle seized the man, and began struggling for the holstered gun, keeping his opponent between himself and the other men the while. He managed to pull the weapon free of leather, began trying to force its muzzle against his antagonist's body. Then the fellow whirled him.

An arm bent around his neck in a strangle hold, tore him away without the pistol. He sank an elbow to the pit of a stomach and got free. A gun barrel struck him a glancing blow on the head, staggering him. Before he could regain his balance, it seemed that a thunderbolt landed on his chin. He saw a shower of sparks, felt his seat bump hard against the ground.

The men swarmed upon him, kicking, stomping, cursing. In their fury and excitement they had forgotten caution. McGonigle fought like a wounded tiger—kicking, spurring, trying to get up, shouting cuss words. He, too, had ceased to think of fighting quietly.

Agony wracked his wiry frame. Stabs of pain were darting all through him. It seemed that his ribs were being caved in, his insides stomped out. He gasped for breath. A red mist swam before his eyes.

Interruption came. There was a pounding of boots. Blurredly, Gunsmoke McGonigle saw a tall, shadowy form approaching at a run, along behind the row of buildings.

Old Luke Kaley's voice bawled raucously, "Tuck your tails and run, you coyotes! Pile offen my sidekick!" Then his six-shooter began to pop.

There was consternation among the masked gang—yapping, cursing, a scurrying of feet. Then a boot crashed to Smoke's chin and his consciousness went out in a fiery explosion.

When Gunsmoke McGonigle came to, the lanky ex-ranger was beside him. Smoke sat up, shook the cobwebs from his brain, worked his jaw, then tenderly felt his face and his body. "Where'd they go?" he grunted.

"Skeedaddled along the alley, then away into the open spaces. I heard the clattering of their horses' hoofs. Tell me what happened."

Briefly Smoke did so. Luke growled, "Stinkin' polecats! I heard the ruckus on the way back from the stable. Recognized your voice, so come a-running. Since I didn't know exactly what was going on or who was who I didn't shoot to hit anybody."

There was a thin run of excitement along Main Street, for the sounds of battle had been heard.

McGonigle growled, "I hate to go out there and answer questions, but I must have my cutters."

"I'd think you'd want to talk to 'em —to find out who were the coyotes—"

"It was that bunch of shadows from the Fork H, I'd bet my last dollar. I recognized the voice of the hulking Tesro, in spite of the fact he tried to muffle it."

"Humph! Then the Hammers sicked them onto you. Do you suppose the ranchers recognized you out there at the Fork H tonight?"

"I don't think so. They looked puzzled, inclined to believe I was one of their kind. I figure they were sent to shadow us, merely in the hope of finding out something about us, and that Tesro exceeded his authority. I think that the beating up was his own idea, to get revenge on me."

They went out onto the street and McGonigle recovered his six-shooters. Surely enough he was showered with questions. He simply told that he had been set upon by an unknown band of rowdies. Later he told Luke, "Better to let Tesro believe they got away with it. But I'll have a reckoning with that jasper one of these days. Right now I'm playing a game."

They went to their hotel room. Smoke bathed his cuts and bruises. When finally he and his friend turned in the young gunman said grimly, "Sleep well, old-timer. We've got some riding to do tomorrow."

ONCE more Gunsmoke McGonigle stood with hat in hand. This time he was looking at the graves of his parents, out amidst the peaceful hills on the one-time McGonigle homestead. "And there lie two more good people," he told Luke. "Dad was killed supposedly by a horse thief, but I've always had a hunch that

the slayer was either Sledge Hammer or one of his gunnies who'd set a trap for my father. Hammer feared and hated my dad, because he had openly pointed the finger of suspicion at him, and had threatened to organize a vigilante committee to clean up the range. They'd nearly gunfought, two or three times.

"Mother'd been in bad health for quite a while, and the shock was too much for her. She soon followed him. I was just a five-year-old dogie then. Uncle Mort took me and raised me until I was nearly fourteen, then—well, you know what happened."

Old Luke Kaley answered soberly, sympathetically, "Gunsmoke McGonigle, I understand now more plain than ever before, how you feel toward the Hammers. Boy, they've caused you plenty of suffering."

Smoke looked up at him and smiled, but it was such a smile as to make one's blood creep. He went to his mount and stirruped up.

"Now where?" asked Luke, anxious to get his young friend's mind onto a new trail of thought.

"To the Prather ranch. I want to talk with Sulie." Luke gave him a keen, wondering glance, but offered no comment.

Unbeknown to the two men, Consuelo Prather, while hunting for a stray horse, had seen them from afar. Reconizing them as the two riders from below the border, and curious as to their present purpose, she had shadowed them.

From concealment she had watched through a pair of binoculars, while the two had paid their visit to the graves. Her pretty face had held a look of wonder as she had seen the young cowboy standing bareheaded, gazing down upon the two mounds. And then an expression of understanding had swept the puzzled look away. She had gasped and almost dropped the glasses. For a long time she sat like a marble image. Then she sprang to her feet, ran to her pony, mounted and rode wildly. She had been at the home ranch about twenty minutes when the two cowboys arrived there.

They stopped on the pretext of asking for water. She invited them into the house.

"All alone here?" asked Smoke, as he glanced about the neat parlor.

"At the moment, yes. Mother went into town with a neighbor woman, and the punchers are out on the range. Be seated, won't you? I'll go to the windmill for some fresh water."

"I'll go with you," Smoke volunteered quickly. She offered no encouragement, no objection—just glanced at him in a disinterested way, then turned toward the kitchen.

"Right nice little spread you've got here," Smoke observed, as side by side they walked to the windmill. "My pard and I would like to work for you. How about it?" Smoke had concluded that there was practically no chance of his being employed by the Hammers. They would have to know him for a renegade before they would put him on the payroll. From this adjacent ranch he would be able to keep an eye on their activities, and at the same time look out for Sulie's welfare.

But the girl said coolly, "This ranch employs but two riders regularly, and we have two trustworthy tophands already."

He urged, but it was no use.

The bucket was full of fresh, cool water now, but he did not drink. Instead he turned suddenly to her and blurted impulsively, "Sulie, don't you know me?"

He saw her slender form stiffen. The smooth face became like one carved from marble. Her eyes were very large and dark against the paleness of it, as she gazed at him. But she did not answer.

"I'm Terry! Terry McGonigle!" he told her in the same husky tone.

She nodded. "I know," she said simply, but still there was no warmth

in her voice. "Why did you assume the name of Smoky Davis?"

"To keep from having gun trouble with the Hammers. They'd be after me pronto if they knew who I really am."

"I'll keep your secret," she promised emotionlessly, then she turned toward the house. "And why did you come back?" she asked, as he caught up with her.

Her aloofness had wounded him deeply. She seemed unaffected by the knowledge that he was Terry McGonigle, the friend of her childhood; that he had come back. Mingled anger, bitterness, and something else which he did not understand at the moment swirled within his heart. He felt a sense of dreariness, and yet at the same moment he wanted to grit his teeth and cuss.

He decided that perhaps she had never forgiven him for his apparent coldness toward her, the seeming lack of appreciation for her sympathy that night at the graveside ten years ago. He apologized now, explained. She passed it off casually, as if it were of no consequence. Then he went into a shell—a very hard shell.

"I guess she's in love with Cord Hammer, or some one else," he told Luke hopelessly as they rode away from the little ranch. "So I just told her I was tired of Mexico and wanted to settle down somewhere on this side. Gave her no inkling of the real story."

ON a hilltop they paused. Down in a valley, showing mingled white and red in the bright sunlight, were the buildings of the Hammer ranch. Gunsmoke McGonigle absently drew his glasses and focused them.

"There go the pigeons again, heading for Mexico," he told Luke. "Umm, two men down by that big cage, and one of them looks like Cord Hammer." He was frowning in deep thought as they moved on. After a while he remarked slowly, "I. wonder if there's some mystery in connection with those birds?"

"Yeah, I been wonderin' the same thing. We'll keep the thought in mind, podner, and maybe give them pigeons some investigatin'."

They traveled on and after a while saw three horsemen moving across country from the direction of the Rio Grande.

"Riders from below the line," muttered Luke, squinting his coffee-brown eyes shrewdly, "and it looks like they're headin' for the Fork H. I'll lope up there to the hillcrest and watch 'em. From that rim I can see all the way down to the Hammer ranch."

"I'll wait for you at the spring over yonder by that motte of cottonwoods. I want to unsaddle, adjust my latigo, and rearrange my saddle-blanket." They parted company, Luke making for the hill rim. Smoke McGonigle heading toward the cottonwoods.

As the cowboy pushed through some brush and came out beside the spring, he jerked his mount to a stop and his right hand involuntarily dropped to the butt of a six-gun. A man was there ahead of him—a very unusual sort of man, for that wilderness scene.

The stranger was rather large, and there was about him a certain air of pompousness. He wore a soft black hat, a flowing black tie, a black store-bought suit—the coat long. His vest was cream-colored, with little black checks. A gold-cable watch chain swung from pocket to pocket. His face was round and soft, his hair frosty.

At sight of the wiry young rider sitting his mount, hand on six-gun the man shot a glance toward some white feathers that were scattered near the spring. Then he looked at a half gallon can which was steaming on a bed of coals. The stranger was sitting hugging his knees, a willow fork in one hand. A short distance away were two horses, one ob-

viously a pack animal. The opened pack was spread out beneath a big cottonwood tree.

Gunsmoke McGonigle glanced at the feathers, too, then his cold eyes flicked back to the stranger.

"Pigeons, huh?" the waddy observed and there was curiosity in his voice.

"Yes, they were watering here, and being short of provisions I just couldn't resist the temptation to knock over a couple of them. If they belonged to your spread I'm willing to pay for them."

Smoke wagged his head. "They weren't pets of mine. I don't work around here a-tall. Just a drifter looking for a job."

The other grinned in vast relief. "Then get right down, cowboy, and join me in some pigeon stew. These birds have been simmering for the last hour. They ought to be getting just about right." He chuckled. "I sure thought I was in for it when I saw you sitting your mount there, hand on hardware."

"Just a habit," remarked Smoke, as he swung down and dropped his reins. Then to himself he muttered, "Pigeons! Um-m! I wonder if there's any significance—"

"My name is Alberts—Hugh J. Alberts. People usually call me Judge Alberts."

The big, officious looking man had got up and was offering a soft hand. Smoke McGonigle shook, but did not mention his own name, or an alias.

The "judge" served the pigeon stew, crackers, and coffee. The two men conversed as they sipped. Although Alberts talked volubly, Smoke observed that he nevertheless was vague. He had come from somewhere down in the lower Rio Grande country, and was on his way northward to enter into some sort of business. He did not state whether or not he was a real judge, but he certainly looked the part. The fellow had an amiable, likable personality. Smoke wondered what he was doing horseback ing it through that rough country. People of such apparent distinction usually traveled by stage or train.

WHEN the meal was finished and the pack closed, Judge Alberts suggested that they ride to Texton together. Smoke mentioned that he was to wait there for a friend.

The judge smiled blandly and said, "Then I'll wait, too, and we'll all travel together. In the meantime, just to kill time, what do you say to a little game of draw poker—for matches, or gravels? I believe I have a deck of cards in one of my saddle pockets."

Smoke agreed. The judge brought the deck and they began to play. Smoke was very lucky. After a while the judge suggested that they play for money—small money—just to make it more interesting. Again Smoke acquiesced. And before he realized it he had been inveigled into a big-money game and was being taken to an artistic cleaning. Too late he realized that this bland, amiable fellow who had called himself "Judge" Alberts, was in reality a mountebank —a card shark. He was mentally kicking himself for having been a sucker, when suddenly old Luke Kaley rode into the opening.

"No, you don't, you swindler!" yelped Luke, as the judge reached to rake in a new pot.

Alberts glanced up in startled surprise, then a glad light overspread his round face and he scrambled to his feet "Luke Kaley, by hell! What are you doin' here, you long-legged jackass? And how are you, anyway?"

Luke swung down. The mouth between the two horns of mustache was stretched in a grin. "Same back at you, judge, you danged old rascal!"

They pumped arms, and then Hugh J. Alberts smiled and explained pompously, "I'm on my way to Texton to enter the field of politics."

"Meaning gambling," chuckled Luke. "Devil help the galoots who

stack up agin you." Then he turned to Smoke and said while grinning from ear to ear, "I reckon he took you to a nifty cleanin', huh, cowboy?"

Gunsmoke McGonigle nodded sheepishly, and old Luke burst into a guffaw. Alberts hastened to say, "Don't think for a minute that I'd cheat a friend of yours, Luke. Here's your money back, cowboy. I meant to return it anyway. I slicked you only as a lark. I—"

"Like hell," chortled Luke.

Hugh J. Alberts glared at him indignantly for a moment, and then the "political" looking man, too, burst into a laugh. Smoke joined them.

Luke Kaley remarked, "Likely you'll be locatin' in the Crazy Horse, as that's Texton's principal saloon and gambling house. While dealin' your pasteboards there, you might be able to do some good, if you will."

"How?"

"By actin' as our eyes and ears, savvy?"

Smoke gave his partner a warning look, but Luke told him confidently, "You don't need to worry none about the judge, podner. He helped me a lot when I was in the ranger service." Then he went on to give Alberts an idea of the situation there in that country. The frosty-haired gambler promised soberly to help them if he could."

"Then you'd better go on down the trail ahead of us," suggested Luke. "It'll be better if you don't know us, never met up with us. Savvy?"

Judge Hugh J. Alberts agreed that his old friend was right, and so a few minutes later he headed down the trail alone, riding one horse and leading another.

"A strange character," remarked McGonigle, as he watched the big, officious looking man depart.

"He shore is," agreed Luke. "A deceivin' old rogue who'd cheat a feller out of his last dollar, and yet who'd give a needy person his last dime."

"Seems to be a gentle, likable soul, in spite of his profession."

Luke spat tobacco juice at a grasshopper, chuckled again. "Yeah, *seems* to be, and he is unless his corns are tromped on. But, cowboy, Judge Hugh J. Alberts is a fightin' fool once his dander is up. He carries a Colt under that long black coat, a derringer up one sleeve, and a throwing-knife down the back of his collar. And believe me the jasper is expert with all three."

Smoke changed the subject. "How about those riders? Did they go to the Fork H?" he asked.

"Shore did. Maybe they were some of that spread's crew. On the other hand, might be they were wolves from below the border."

THEY loafed at the spring, for they wanted to give Alberts about an hour's start of them, to allow him time to reach town before they again rode. They were just about ready to mount, when Smoke heard the ex-ranger say, "Aw-awh! Here comes Cord Hammer!"

Smoke had been tightening his cinch. He glanced up and, looking through the stand of columns that were trunks of giant cottonwoods, caught glimpses of an approaching horseman. It was Cord Hammer all right. The man was riding leisurely, apparently with no thought of finding anyone at the spring.

As Hammer rounded the motte of cottonwoods, however, he immediately saw the two men, and as he came on his attitude bespoke deep curiosity. He rode up and halted. His cold blue eyes bored each man swiftly as he said, "Howdy, gents. Didn't expect to find anybody here. Just dropped by to water my bronc."

"Same here," spoke McGonigle.

Hammer swept the whole place with a glance, then, and Smoke was sure that the fellow started slightly as his eyes riveted upon the scattering of feathers beside the spring. When those eyes stared again at him and Luke, they were as hard as mar-

bles. The fellow blurted almost ludicrously, "Pigeons, huh?"

McGonigle nodded. "Looks like somebody had a pigeon stew."

"Yeah—somebody," Cord Hammer said dryly, still drilling them with a suspicious gaze.

Gunsmoke McGonigle shrugged. "Don't look that way at us, we're not guilty. You can easy see we're not carrying cooking utensils."

Cord looked around again. "Yeah, that's right."

"Think a powerful lot of your pigeons, don't you, Mr. Hammer? Your Mex watchman hopped us the other night for just stopping to look at them."

Cord Hammer was silent for a moment, his bold face inscrutable, and then he said slowly, "They're pets—a hobby of mine. You any idea who did this?" He gestured toward the feathers.

Again Smoke shrugged. "Why should I? I'm a stranger in these parts. Some peon traveler, maybe."

The glare of suspicion remained in Hammer's cold blue eyes. "How happens that you two rannies are out this way?" Apparently it was just a casual inquiry—a change of subject—but Smoke knew that the fellow was as alert as a wolf. The cowboy answered lightly:

"We were on our way to the Fork H, to find out if your father had made up his mind yet about giving us a job."

Again there was some subtle innuendo, but Gunsmoke McGonigle was just as elusive as before. He could see that Cord Hammer was baffled, irritated, and he chuckled inwardly.

"The Fork H has no job open at the present," Hammer said curtly. "Maybe we can use you later—provided you can give absolute proof that you're all right. Ranchmen have to be mighty careful around here these days. A lot of border hoppers in the country." He gave Smoke a searching stare, then abruptly he wheeled his mount, spoke a terse "So-long," and went loping away.

"Forgot to water his bronc," observed old Luke Kaley, as he squinted one eye, and toyed with his long mustache.

A queer little smile was playing about Smoke's lips. "Yeah, the fella was right upset. We've got him and his dad buffaloed, podner. They don't know what to think about us. And—pigeons! Some mystery there, Luke, sure as you're a foot high. See how startled he looked when he saw the feathers? Pets, huh! The only thing Cord Hammer would pet is a six-gun or a rifle!"

Luke bobbed his head, fingered his bony chin. "Yeah, we'll investigate the birds," he declared. "And somethin' tells me we'll be takin' a big risk in so doin'."

CHAPTER VI

GUN-SNAKE STRIKE

IN the Crazy Horse Saloon bland Judge Hugh J. Alberts had enticed Duke Brandon into a game of draw poker in the same amiable, seemingly innocent manner with which he had inveigled Gunsmoke McGonigle. And just as McGonigle had done, Brandon awoke too late to the realization that he was up against a card sharp.

Recognizing the man as a genius in his profession, Brandon had been only too glad to give the smiling, apologetic, official looking "gentleman" a house-job there in the Crazy Horse. Thus it was that when Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley arrived in Texton, they found the likable old mountebank already ensconced in a position of prominence at the town's leading "house of recreation."

Early that night Luke Kaley got himself bogged down into a poker game with four other waddies. Gunsmoke McGonigle roamed about town. He talked with the sheriff, his old friend Andrew Silsby, and others. It was about nine o'clock when he stopped abruptly on the street and stared.

A muttered exclamation escaped his lips. A light was burning in the hotel room which he and Luke had rented. "Humph! I wonder what that means?" he asked himself. "Just the hotel man attending to somethin? Or is somebody bent on stealing our chaps and warbags?" He went hurrying along the sidewalk, boot heels rapping sharply upon the planking.

He found the skinny old clerk alone in the lobby, reading an El Paso newspaper. "Who's upstairs?" the waddy snapped.

The frowsy-haired old fellow looked at him over silver-rimmed spectacles and replied, "W'y, nobuddy at this early hour of the night. What few guests we got are out enjoyin' themselves, and they won't start comin' in until—" He broke off and gazed in surprise, for McGonigle had walked swiftly across the small lobby and now was running lightly up the stairs.

The hallway was very dark. Treading as softly as a prowling cat, McGonigle went to his room. There was no streak of light at the bottom of the door. He stooped and applied an eye to the keyhole. Still no light. Crouched there he listened intently. Not a sound! Had the prowler accomplished his purpose and sneaked away, or was he waiting in there within the room, gun in hand?

Smoke McGonigle's thin lips hardened over his teeth. He drew one of his Colts. The other hand went out and found the doorknob. A turn, a little push, and he knew that the door was unlocked. The next instant he flung it wide open and started to leap into the room—but instead of so doing he spat an exclamation and whirled on the balls of his feet.

A human bulk collided with him and carried him backward. A hand that gripped like a beartrap had seized his right wrist and shoved it aside. A fist smashed against his jaw, and he saw a shower of small stars. The next instant he was down, on his back. Dazed though he was, his left hand dropped instinctively to the other Colt. That hand was swept away. He felt the gun rip from leather, heard it thud against a wall several feet away. Rallying his wits, he

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started to fight. But a gun barrel cracked against his head and consciousness fled from him.

He became conscious of a soft buzzing. It resolved itself into guarded voices.

One of them said, "Not a thing to give us a line on him."

Another muttered, "Footsteps on the stairs! Come on, let's scoot!"

There was a soft rushing of feet. Smoke McGonigle sat up and shook his head. His brain was swimming dizzily. Still goofy from the blow above the left ear, he got to his feet and staggered crazily about in the dark. Then as his senses began to clear he reeled to the door and stepped out into the hall. The wizened old clerk, carrying a lighted lamp, was just coming into view on the small landing. The little man held the light high, thrust forward his skinny neck and stared bug-eyed.

"Whut the deuce happened?" he wanted to know. "I got to wonderin' about how queer you'd acted, so I decided to investigate. You look as though you'd been mugwumped."

"Coupla fellas were pilferin' my room. They slugged me. Did you see anybody leave?"

"No, but there's a rear stairs. Mebbe—"

Smoke's brain was pretty clear now. He wheeled, sprang back into the room, struck a match and located his two guns. The next moment he was pounding down the hallway, a Colt forty-five in each fist.

THE back door was standing wide open. He ran out onto the little balcony and glanced about. Not a living thing within sight. Down the steps he went, boots thumping. He circled the rear end of the hotel building, sped through a dark little alley, and came onto the edge of the street. He flung glances right and left, but Main Street looked innocent enough. There were only a few human figures moving in the semi-gloom, and none of them was close.

Head perfectly clear now, although still aching, he considered the situation swiftly. The voices had come to him in muffled tones, while he was still in a daze. But unless he was mistaken they belonged to Cord and Sledge Hammer, and so he set out grimly to find the two ranchmen.

He was striding past an opening between two dark store buildings, when he heard a scuffing of boots upon gravel. Instantly he was pivoting, jerking into a crouch, fanning for guns. He jabbed the two Colts away, muttered an exclamation, sprang forward as his old pal staggered into the dim light. Blood was running down one leathery cheek.

"Luke!" McGonigle blurted huskily. "What the dickens happened?"

"I'd set out to look for you and was passin' the mouth of this black alley when somebody struck me from behind. Don't understand it a-tall," he mumbled as he dug a wallet from a pocket and opened it. "I ain't been robbed."

"But you were thoroughly searched, same as me. Look, shirt unbuttoned, couple pockets turned inside out."

"But who—why—"

"The Hammers thought maybe they'd find something on us which would show them what we are—renegades, or lawmen. They're up a tree about us. They hoped to find badges, or other credentials, either from the law or their friends in Mexico, and thereby satisfy their minds."

He then swiftly told of his own experience. "Come on," he snapped, "let's see if we can find those two."

Luke wiped the blood from his cheek and accompanied his young friend. They searched, and made inquiries throughout the town, but they did not see or hear anything of the Hammers. "I guess the stinkers sneaked in, hid their mounts in the dark, an' sneaked away again when their dirty work was done," growled Smoke. "Let's have the doc look at the bruises on our heads. Then we'll go

over to the hotel room and take a look around."

As they tramped along, Luke suggested, "Maybe it wasn't the Hammers who konked us; maybe it was Tesro and that same gang—"

"It was the Hammers, I tell you! I recognized their voices, even though I was only semi-conscious!"

The bird-faced old clerk was inquisitive when they entered the hotel a short time later, but they soon dismissed him curtly. Alone with Luke in their room Smoke reasoned, "The Hammers must've heard my inquiry at the desk—or my footsteps on the stairs. One of 'em was hiding here, the other in the room opposite. Did you notice its door is open?"

"Hey, look at this!" Luke exclaimed suddenly. He picked up a feather from the floor, handed it to his young friend.

"Humph! Evidently the fella who dropped it has been among the birds lately. It clung to his duds, or maybe fell into a pocket, and during the tussle here it fell to the floor unnoticed."

Luke twisted his long mustache and mumbled, "Yeah, pard, we shore got to do some more lookin' into that pigeon business. If we could only manage to get hired out at the Fork H—"

"The Hammers won't employ anybody that they're unsure of. We'll locate close enough to keep an eye on that ranch, though—at the Prather spread."

"Huh? But I thought you said the gal refused to hire us—that she has a coupla punchers already, and don't want no more."

McGonigle smiled mysteriously. "They're quitting their jobs."

The hawk-faced old cowpoke blinked. "You don't mean — you're going to use gun persuasion to make 'em drift?"

"Wait and see," McGonigle replied, then laughed recklessly.

FROM a distance Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley saw the two punchers quit the ranch. Smoke grinned broadly and said, "Well, there they go."

Luke nodded. "How'd you do it, podner? Let me in on your secret."

"I felt I could confide in them. They were nester kids when I left these parts. Their dad and mine had been great friends. It wasn't hard for me to persuade them to take a vacation, with pay. I furnished the pay."

"And now I reckon you figure the girl will hire us in their stead."

"If she doesn't we'll camp on this ranch anyway."

They found Sulie at the horse corral. "Good morning, gents," she greeted as she eyed them curiously from under a side of her hat brim. "Stop off for water again?"

"No," answered Smoke. "We're on our way to the Fork H to see once more about getting on there. Met up with those two punchers who were leaving you, and figured you might hire us in their places. We figured we'd rather work for you than for the Hammers."

"I'm surprised you'd work for the Hammers at all. Just what is the idea, Terry?"

"We've got to work somewhere, and the Hammers haven't recognized me."

She eyed him keenly. "By the way, you didn't by any chance have anything to do with Shorty's and Laz's quitting this ranch, did you?"

"You mean me and Luke? Shucks, how could we?"

She looked down at her boot toes to keep the two punchers from seeing the twinkle in her eyes. "All right, you're hired. Take the first day sort of getting acquainted with the ranch." As she walked toward the house she was laughing secretly. "They had guilt written all over their faces," she told herself. "I'll have to give them credit for being ingenious."

And so Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley went to work for the Prathers. The Hammers quickly learned of the fact, for Cord was a frequent visitor there. He told Sulie, "They're doubtful characters. Keep

an eye on them, and tell me if you notice anything off-color." Perhaps he had decided that it was just as well that they were there, where "his" girl could watch them for him.

Smoke and Sulie often rode range together in the days that followed. He felt that he was irresistibly falling in love with her. She had not altered her aloof, businesslike manner toward him, however, and he told himself bitterly that she must be in love with Cord Hammer.

One day came a report from Judge Hugh J. Alberts: "Something's up. The Hammers and Duke Brandon have been plotting. Once I heard Cord say something about pigeons. He spoke rather loud, and instantly his dad and Brandon shushed him down."

They had met the "judge" in a restaurant. Now they went to see the sheriff. The lawman suggested, "Maybe the pigeons are used to carry notes."

"But why a whole flock of them?" asked Smoke.

"Um-m, yeah, that's right—unless the others are sent along just to confuse anybody who might otherwise become suspicious."

Old Luke Kaley squinted one mild brown eye and said thoughtfully, "In my ranger days I learnt that smugglers sometimes use mighty ingenious schemes to get their stuff across the border. Maybe the birds are bringing over contraband—say, dope, or jewels."

McGonigle smiled twistedly and wagged his head. "Wild idea, old-timer. A pigeon couldn't carry enough dope to make smuggling pay. And diamonds? Huh! What smuggler would trust anything so precious on a bird?"

"Not on him, maybe, but in him—the craw or the innerds. And—no, a single pigeon couldn't carry enough dope to make smugglin' pay, but a big flock of 'em makin' frequent trips could. A little tube fixed to each and —" He shrugged bony shoulders, gestured with long arms.

Smoke McGonigle was staring. He exclaimed hoarsely, "Gosh, I hadn't thought of such possibilities!"

The sheriff whacked muscular legs with heavy hands. "Old-timer, you may have something there. Meet me at the spring early in the morning, you two. I'll bring three shotguns and we'll go bird hunting."

"Meaning?" Smoke questioned.

"We'll stake out in the breaks and bring down some of them feathered critters, then we'll examine 'em inside and out."

The partners had observed that the pigeons made daily flights back and forth, and that they always followed approximately the same course. The three men stationed themselves on a hogback, some fifty yards from each other, and waited. Three days in succession they did this, and on each occasion they brought down pigeons, both coming and going. They fine-combed the birds, literally turned them inside out, but found nothing to substantiate their suspicions.

AT mid-morning of the third day, they had shot down three pigeons from a flock bound for Mexico, and had just finished literally taking them apart.

"It seems a shame to've killed the little fellows," said Gunsmoke McGonigle, "but there's so much at stake."

"Well, we won't shoot any more of them," sighed the sheriff. "Guess we'll have to admit we're licked—this time."

"I still say there's some mystery about the pigeons," Smoke declared stubbornly. "That flock—or another one—is due back at the Fork H sometime this afternoon. I suggest we watch the ranch, and be on hand when they come in."

"Good idea," agreed John Clants. "And we'll examine every bird from bill to claws."

They had taken the slain birds down into the valley to examine them. The little rocky opening wherein they

sat was closely surrounded by thick brush. Now as Gunsmoke's gaze came up from the gutted pigeon he held in his hands, he stiffened and an electric shock went through him. His eyes had squarely met those of some one who was peering through the foliage, ten paces away.

Instantly foliage and slender branches flurried, blotting out the handmade rift. The eyes were gone. McGonigle sprang to his feet.

"Somebody's been watching and eavesdropping," he exclaimed, and went bounding toward the spot where the spy had stood. Muttering in excitement, Luke and the sheriff got up and ran after him.

McGonigle plunged into the bushes and glanced about. His guns were in his hands, for the eavesdropper might fight if he found himself cornered. Smoke glimpsed no one, however, for he could see but a short distance in any direction. He paused to listen, but by this time his two friends were smashing into the brush, and he could hear no other sound. He yapped as they joined him:

"You go left, sheriff! Straight ahead, Luke! I'll turn right. We'll round up the fella and make him talk." He put down his head and went charging away, tearing through the bushes like a chased maverick.

Now and then he paused to listen, but he could hear only the sounds created by his two comrades. They were calling back and forth to each other occasionally as they smashed through the brush. After a while he came out into a scattered forest of mesquite and scrub cedar. Breathing heavily he stopped once more. No longer could he hear the sounds of his two friends' movements. He was some two hundred yards from the spot where the search had been started.

He was about to head back, and then he jerked to a halt. A rider had come out of the scrub forest and was flitting over the crest of a barren rise. The next instant the rider had vanished. Gunsmoke McGonigle's blood was cold and sluggish in his veins, for he had recognized the fleeing one as Consuelo Prather!

For a full minute after she had disappeared he continued to stand there and stare. Then he turned slowly and headed back for the horses. He was like a person in a daze. His heart was leaden, a bit sick. His boots seemed ponderous and clumsy. His brain was spinning dizzily. He shook his head, ran a hand over his face as if to wake himself from an incredible dream. "Sulie!" he whispered hoarsely. "How come she was watching and eavesdropping? Was she acting as a spy for the Hammers?" The thought galled and angered him.

Back at the spot where he had seen her peering through the foliage, he found tracks made by her little boots. For a long time he stood there gazing at them, his face like stone, his gray eyes as cold as ice. Then slowly, with rakes of one of his own boots, he erased the dim prints. Afterward, like a man in a dream, he went into the little rocky opening and sat down to wait the return of his two comrades.

He muttered, "And to think, she'd throw in with the Hammers, against me—especially when I'm trying to help her. Sulie Prather, what a change the years have wrought in you!"

Luke and the sheriff soon joined him there. "No sound, no sign," the square-jawed officer announced laconically. "You?"

Smoke forced a smile. "I heard plenty of sounds—made by you two."

"We might look around for hoss tracks," suggested Luke.

"What for?" growled the sheriff. "It's a cinch that spy was from the Fork H ranch. I reckon our banging away with the shotguns attracted attention."

"Maybe this spy business explains why we ain't found nothin' on or in the birds," suggested Luke. "Maybe the Hammers have known all along what we were up to."

"Maybe," Sheriff John Clants admitted. "But just the same, we'll be on hand when the pigeons arrive at the Fork H ranch this afternoon."

CHAPTER VII

NIGHT RAIDERS

FROM concealment the three men watched the Fork H ranch house and the western sky. The day was beginning to wear away. The sun was only an hour high now. "Maybe there won't be any birds from Mexico today," muttered old Luke Kaley, disappointment in his voice.

Gunsmoke McGonigle bit out, "In that case—" He broke off in an exclamation. He had been stretched out on the ground, but now he jerked to a sitting position. "Look!" he said tensely.

Three riders were leisurely approaching the ranch. "The Hammers, and Sulie Prather," Luke whispered wonderingly. "What's she doing there?"

The sheriff suggested something which brought rage boiling up within Gunsmoke McGonigle: "The girl might've lost a few rangeland compunctions while away in that shorthorn school. And with the Prathers sort of hard up financially—I wonder if she has throwed in with the Hammers and—"

"Shut up!" snarled McGonigle, and he glared like a prodded tiger. "You finish what you started to suggest and I'll slam the words right back down your throat!"

"Here, here! Climb off your high-horse, cowboy! I—"

"The pigeons!" Luke interrupted.

The sheriff scrambled up and made hurriedly for his mount. "Come on, we want to be on hand when the birds arrive."

They approached the ranch at a brisk gallop; even so, the fast flying flock beat them there. It circled two or three times—flecks of white against the soft blue of the sky—then settled onto the cage-houses.

The Mexican came out of the nearby shack, and shut the pigeons away. His gaze was upon the three approaching riders as he did so. They pulled up close to the wire netting.

"Right nice flock of birds you got there," remarked the sheriff. "Could I buy a dozen of 'em?"

"*Quién sabe*," the swarthy keeper murmured. He was a sullen, low-browed, bushy-headed fellow who walked with a limp.

"Mind if I go in and look at 'em?"

The three riders dismounted. The Mexican glanced uneasily toward the house, then relief flooded his pock-marked face. "Here ees come the Hammers. Eet ees for them to grant the permeesion, señores."

McGonigle looked past an angle of the little building, hardened at sight of Sulie Prather coming along with the Hammers.

"Howdy, gents," greeted Cord as the trio came up. "What brings you out this way today, sheriff?"

"Been huntin' for the sign of a horse thief who was reported seen in the breaks. Run into these two waddies on the edge of Cloverleaf 3 range, and they volunteered to help me. No luck, though. You folks see a stranger about lately?"

The Hammers shook their heads. The lawman then asked Cord the same question that he had put to the Mexican. "Why, sure, you can ***have*** a dozen of them," Cord generously offered. "Come in and look them over."

The investigators were taken aback. They had expected Cord to demur. But he led the way into the cage, began catching birds and handing them over for inspection. Gunsmoke McGonigle sensed that the fellow was mocking the searchers; that there really was something

wrong here, and that young Hammer was sardonically defying them to find it. Vaguely in Smoke's mind those birds had taken on a sinister meaning. But when the whole flock had been searched, not a thing of a suspicious nature had been found.

Cord Hammer said generously, "Pick out any twelve you want, sheriff, and—"

"I'll pick 'em up some other time," Clants interrupted. "Got to make preparations for 'em, you know—build a home."

McGonigle had observed that the pigeon cote was divided into two parts, that the birds on the other side all were colored. He mentioned this, and Cord Hammer explained, "They're what we call the impures. No matter how careful you are in breeding, colored ones just will show up occasionally. We separate the colored birds from the whites and eat the off-breeds as squabs, or in pigeon stews and pies."

The explanation was perfectly logical, yet McGonigle's feelings that there was something sinister in connection with the pigeons persisted. He imagined there were malevolent, gloating notes in their croakings.

The investigators did not ask to examine the colored birds, for it was only white ones which they had seen in flight. The sheriff inquired about these flights, but Cord explained that it was only for the purpose of exercise. All the time, though, the sardonic light remained in his cold eyes, the ghost of a sneering smile on his lips.

Sulie Prather's expression was puzzling. Was it faint amusement, calm defiance, or what? She invited the sheriff to have supper at the Cloverleaf 3. "It's but a little out of your way, and Mother will have everything ready by the time we get there." John Clants readily agreed.

As the Hammers watched the party leave, Cord's face creased in a mocking smile. "Foxy," he murmured softly. "But not foxy enough. They didn't find anything wrong with the birds. They never will. We're too smart for them."

And it seemed that inside the cages the restless birds increased their ghoulish croakings. Cord laughed harshly.

Sledge suggested in a throaty growl, "John Clants ain't through yet. He'll be snooping around here again. You can bet on that."

"Let him hop to it. In fact, he can come out here and act as keeper of the damned things if he likes, just so long as we're allowed to do the turning out of them, and to see them when they come in—eh, Dad?"

Old Sledge Hammer bobbed his head, and they both laughed harshly.

SUPPER at the Cloverleaf 3 ranch had been over an hour ago. The sheriff had hit the trail for Texton. Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley were alone in the little bunkhouse. Luke might just as well have considered that he himself was alone, for Smoke hadn't said a word since they had come down from the main house. He had just been sitting there hunched on an edge of his bunk, staring grimly at the floor, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Finally the old ex-ranger said bluntly, "Well, for gosh sakes come on and get it off your chest, cowboy. What's eatin' you?"

Smoke was not going to tell him that it was Sulie Prather who had spied upon them that day. No one was aware that he knew the identity of the eavesdropper, not even Sulie, he thought. The cowboy ground a cigarette butt under a boot sole and said in a hard, deliberate voice:

"Luke, I been thinking. I'm still convinced there's some crooked business in connection with those pigeons. Why would they be so carefully tended, so closely guarded? Cord Hammer was laughing up his sleeve out there today. He knew we'd come to

try to get something on him and his killer dad, and he was daring us to find anything wrong."

"Yeah, I got the same impression. There were mocking devils in his eyes as he helped us to examine them birds."

"We're going back tonight—now."

"Yeah? How come?"

Gunsmoke McGonigle explained in a low, staccato voice. Luke's brown eyes glowed. He slapped his thin, bowed legs and exclaimed, "By gollies the scheme might work! Come on, let's get goin'!"

Smoke grinned now. "Yes, and guns might work there at the Fork H, too. Better not feel so jubilant until we're safely back here at the Cloverleaf 3."

They put out the light, stole from the bunkhouse, and a short time later were riding quietly away into the night, heading once more for the Hammer ranch.

When they came within sight of the place the main building was lighted, but the rest of the premises was dark. They worked their way down to the edge of the great opening within which the ranch was situated. Smoke left his horse concealed in some brush two hundred yards from the corral and got up behind Luke.

"All right, go ahead—keeping the barn between us and the dwellings down there," Smoke said.

Riding slowly so that the sound of the hoofbeats wouldn't be noticeable, they reached the huge barn. Smoke McGonigle slid down, went to a corner of the structure, peeped. All seemed very peaceful. He grinned mordantly when he thought of the excitement which would break out soon.

He slithered along the back of the barn until he had the big pigeonhouse between himself and the shack of the Mexican caretaker, then like a great bounding cat he went straight for the cage. He had noticed that there were some tall broomweeds growing in rear of the structure. Another moment and he was lying among them, right alongside the back of the cage. Now it was up to Luke Kaley to carry out his part of the scheme.

He had not long to wait. Evidently the old-timer had been watching him from the corner of the barn. Suddenly a horseman came rocketing out of the night. He bounced to a stop in front of the pigeon-house. Powder lightning flashed in the blue gloom. Gun thunder jarred the night. Luke had shot the padlock from one of the cage doors. He seized the door and flung it open, gigged his horse, fired again, jerked the other door open. It all had happened within an instant, and now he was tearing away into the night, leaving pandemonium behind him.

A dim, ghostly figure popped out of the shack. It was the Mexican watchman, in his nightshirt. There was a rumpus inside the bunkhouse, a stomping of boots within the main dwelling. The Mexican held a Winchester, and he began pumping lead in the direction from which hoofbeats were coming. The pattering quickly died in the night, and he ceased firing.

Men were swarming out of the bunkhouse. The Hammers were quickly running toward the barn and shouting to know what was the trouble. The Mexican yelled back an explanation of what had happened. Sledge Hammer's voice came roaring. "Close the doors, you damed fool! Close the doors! Some of the pigeons may get out!"

The guard hurried to obey. The hiding, listening cowboy wondered: "What difference would it make if some of 'em did get out—at night?"

Sledge called harshly to the men who had come out of the bunkhouse, guns in hand, "Go on back to bed. There's nothing you can do. By the time you got saddled that raider would be miles away." Slowly, then, the Fork H gunnies streamed back indoors.

GUNSMOKE McGONIGLE listened acutely to what was said by the Mexican caretaker and the Hammers. Once more the watchman jabbered an explanation of what had happened.

Sledge Hammer remarked uneasily, "Humph! Now why do you suppose he wanted to let the pigeons out?"

Silence for a moment, and then Cord reasoned slowly, "Maybe he belongs to some rival gang, and wants to get us mixed up with Quincey for some purpose. I wish I could figure out that fellow Smoky Davis, and his long-legged pal. Those two have me completely hoodooed."

Sledge growled, "Did you get a look at the rider, Comos? What was he like?"

"I seen heem not at all. By the time I jump out of bed, grab the gon and run eento the open, he ees alrady gone eento the night."

"Did any of the pigeons quit the cage?"

"That I do not know, señor."

"Damnation!" snapped Cord Hammer. "We'd better send a rider down to Quincey's place! Should any of those colored pigeons show up there the whole works would be gummed up."

"Yes, we'll send Tesro." As they moved away toward the bunkhouse Sledge called back, "Sit up the rest of the night and watch that cage, Comos. We'll go into town tomorrow and get two more padlocks."

Gunsmoke McGonigle, lying flat on his belly amidst the tall broomweeds, felt grimly jubilant. His scheme had worked beautifully. He and Luke had hoped that in their excitement, not knowing that an eavesdropper was hidden nearby, the Fork H men would talk. This the Hammers had done, although their words had left him mystified. And so it was the colored pigeons, not the white ones, that meant something! Just what, he wondered. Why would their going to "Quincey" gum up the works?

"I'd better get out of here pronto," thought Smoke. "That Mex will be eagle-eyed, once he gets dressed and plunks himself down on guard."

The cowboy rose from the weeds and went gliding swiftly away toward the barn. Once behind the great building he would be safe, but again he must cross an open space. Comos had gone into the shack. The fellow must have glanced back through a window and seen him, for the next instant the ghostly figure popped into view again, in the doorway. Smoke McGonigle sensed that a rifle came up. He ducked so low that his chest almost struck his churning knees. It was well that he did so. The Winchester cracked viciously. Flame streaked in the gloom. A bullet zipped over McGonigle's hunched form and bored through the barn wall.

The cowboy snapped one of his own guns free and began blasting away. He was shooting at the door frame, however, not at the Mexican. He had no desire to down the watchman. The hot fire had the desired result. With a howl of dismay the Mexican whirled and vanished into the shack. He now began yelling again to the Hammers.

Sledge and Cord had now reached the bunkhouse. Cursing furiously they came racing back, guns in hands. Smoke heard a smashing and a tinkling of glass. The Mexican had rammed the barrel of his Winchester through a window pane. Once more the weapon spat fire and lead, but the cowboy was a dim, racing figure, and the guard missed. Smoke felt the breeze of the passing bullet on the back of his neck. Just as he wheeled around a corner of the barn, came a third shot. The pellet tore splinters from the angle of planking, an inch behind his back.

Now the barn was between him and the gunmen, but there was yet two hundred yards of open space between himself and the thicket wherein he had concealed his roany horse. "If that Mex runs out a little way, so as to bring me in the clear, he'll make

it hot for me," thought Gunsmoke McGonigle.

He had told his friend to hightail it into the breaks and wait for him at a designated spot. Luke had said nothing, but the ex-ranger had harbored no thought of leaving his pal back there afoot, to make a getaway as best he could. Once out among the trees and bushes Luke had circled back. Now he came tearing out of the night, and as he rode he let out a yell so that his friend would know who was coming.

Smoke ran to meet him. Luke reared his horse to a stop, wheeled the animal, thrust down a rail-like arm. Gunsmoke McGonigle seized it. Luke gigged his mount and heaved As the horse snorted and lunged, Smoke alighted behind the cantle. The next instant he and Luke Kaley were streaking away into the night.

Behind them gunfire broke out. They lay very close to the running horse. Bullets snapped about them savagely for an instant, and then it was all over. The firing had ceased. They entered a stand of scrub cedars and went pounding on. There was no pursuit.

The next morning, just as they were leading their saddled horses from the corral, they saw the Hammers and three Fork H gunnies come out of the mesquite and head toward them. "I expected as much," Smoke McGonigle muttered. "Get ready for gun trouble, podner."

CHAPTER VIII

Hot-Lead Prophecy

THE mounted party came up, deployed into a semi-circle, and halted. "Morning, gents," McGonigle greeted easily. Luke Kaley merely bobbed his head. The visitors said nothing, just stared. After a while Gunsmoke McGonigle prompted, "Well, what's on your minds?"

Cord Hammer clipped out coldly, "Somebody raided the Fork H last night."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, tried to set all our pigeons free." His hard blue eyes, the coppery ones of his iron-jawed father, were drilling the two waddies suspiciously.

"Humph!" said Luke. "Must've been somebody with hoomanitarian idees."

"At least it was some one with *ideas*," growled Sledge Hammer. "There were two of the raiders," he said meaningly.

"Let's quit whipping the devil around the stump and get down to facts," Smoke suggested boldly. "You suspect me and my partner, is that it?"

"If the boot fits, wear her."

"But why the heck would we want to turn your pigeons out?" protested Luke.

"Yeah, why?" Cord asked flatly. "That's what we want to know."

Gunsmoke McGonigle cocked his gray-Stetsoned head to one side and said deliberately, "Hammers, we're getting damned tired of being run over by you fellas. Sunday night you cracked us on our heads, then searched our persons and our effects."

The two ranchmen looked startled. Then slowly Cord Hammer grinned maliciously, and the bullet scar on his left cheek pulled the otherwise handsome face slightly awry.

"Well, you see you're doubtful characters," he tacitly confessed insolently.

"So are you!" Smoke rapped out on impulse. "And now you come here accusing us of busting your cages and trying to turn out your pigeons."

Sledge Hammer, bulking like a great lump of rock in his saddle, growled determinedly, "Can you prove an alibi? Because if you can't, we're taking you down to the Rio and giving you a chance to hit the long trail."

Gunsmoke McGonigle's gray eyes

sparkled like glacier ice. His full chest rose and fell in a long, deep breath. The nostrils at the end of his straight nose pinched, then dilated and quivered. Once more he was thinking of the past—the deaths, the burning of the printshop, his life as an outcast. And here was the man behind it all, telling him that he must ride!

The young gunner's voice was velvety, but dripping with menace nevertheless as he said, "Yeah? Like hell! I don't have to offer any alibis to you. And get this! I'll shoot forty kinds of hell out of the first one of you that makes a fighting move!"

"And I'll take up right where my podner leaves off," avowed Luke.

There was ominous silence—a silence that seemed to tingle. Gunsmoke McGonigle was crouched slightly, clean-muscled body perfectly balanced on spindly legs. His elbows were back and his wire-tendoned hands were spread in readiness to sweep the two Colt forty-fives from their holsters. His lips twisted away from set teeth in what was half a taunting smile, half a snarl.

Luke Kaley drawled, "Seems to me you two gents are makin' a lot of stink about them there birds. Leads a feller to believe there may be some crooked business in connection with 'em."

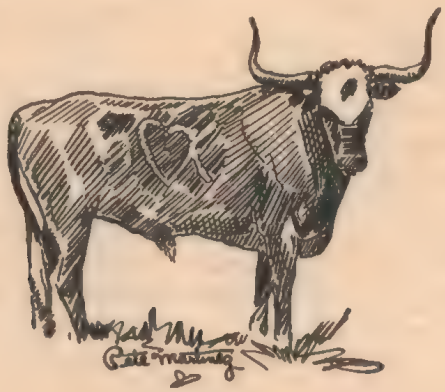
Cord's eyes shimmered coldly. "Did you find anything wrong when you examined them?"

"What one brain can plot, another can solve. What's a new trick to a pup may be an old one to an experienced dawg. Happens I used to be in the ranger service—and maybe I savvy about them pigeons."

Cord's thin, mocking smile was gone. He yapped, "Yeah? Savvy what?"

"We shall see, we shall see. Might be I'll suggest to the sheriff that it'll be a good idee to take over that whole mess of birds, to be held and studied plumb thorough."

The riders looked startled. Apparently here was a possibility which they had not foreseen. Cord's face went stony—that of his father dark with rage.



The elder Hammer growled. "You'd better keep your damned bill out of our affairs, you old buzzard, or you'll get it shot clean away."

A new storm of anger and hatred swirled up within McGonigle. Once more he was thinking of the cold-blooded murder of his uncle ten years before. Recklessly, bitterly he snapped, "Any shooting you do, Sledge Hammer, will likely come when your intended victim isn't expecting it."

Suppressed fury half choked Sledge's hoarse voice as he rumbled: "No man can get away with talking to me like you have, cowboy." Then suddenly his rage was unleashed and he was springing into battle."

McGonigle's lean, brown hands miraculously filled with gun butts. But that tricky, much experienced gunfighter, Sledge Hammer, had reared his mount as he had chopped a hand toward his holster.

"Hold it!" snapped McGonigle, but Sledge didn't stop the draw. The muzzle of the big six-shooter yawned, and the next instant was blotted out in a swirl of smoke.

THE slug went wild, for McGonigle had shot first. Sledge had escaped injury, however, by ducking and swinging the neck of his upreared mount. The animal squealed as Smoke's bullet ripped a bloody furrow across that neck. Then its forehoofs thumped to the ground and it began bucking. Taken by surprise, the heavy-set rider fought to stay on. He could give no further attention to gunfighting in that moment. McGonigle could easily have drilled him then, but the young gunfighter was not one to shoot a man who was unable to fight back.

Cord had stabbed for hardware, too, but Luke Kaley's big hogleg already was out.

"No you don't!" the ex-ranger yelped. "Pull that cutter and I'll drill you!"

And so Cord's right hand froze on his pistol butt. Smoke swung his guns toward the three Fork H gunnies who had come there with the Hammers.

"That goes for you hombres, too!" he snapped.

Sledge's wounded mount pitched away to a distance of some forty yards from the corral before he got control of the animal. But the determined owner of the Fork H came charging back, gun ready for action.

"Cut down on them, you damned fools!" he roared at his gang. "We've got them outnumbered five to two! Riddle them with hot lead!"

"No!" screamed Sulie Prather's voice. "Wait! I can straighten out this whole thing!"

She came flying around a bow in the circular fence. Smoke hoped to heaven the Fork H men would heed her plea. She would be in great danger should lead start flying again.

Guns rested immobile. Men stared hard at her. She halted, looked around a bit wildly for a moment. Then she called huskily to Cord Hammer, "I heard what was said about the raid on the pigeons. What time did it occur?"

"About half past nine last night. Why?"

A forced smile came to her lips. "Then I can furnish an alibi for my two punchers. They were up at the ranch house, playing dominoes with Mother and me until eleven o'clock."

Smoke and Luke stared at the girl in surprise. She did not look at either.

Sledge Hammer growled, "Will your maw two-time that alibi?"

She stiffened, tossed up her smooth chin. The little face was cold, haughty, the dark eyes hot. "I beg your pardon!" she said cuttingly.

Sledge hastened to mumble, "I apologize. I wasn't accusing you of lying. It won't be necessary for you to prove your statement by your mother." Then he gave McGonigle a black look and added, "But that don't plumb settle the quarrel. That bitter-mouthed young gunny said things that means fight in any man's language."

"The fight was of your own making," she told him sharply. The girl was now in control both of herself and the situation. "How dare you come here and bring gun trouble to my ranch! If you've got one shred of respect for me—you and Cord—take those gunnies of yours and go home."

There was indecisive quiet for a moment, and then Cord Hammer's hard blue eyes turned back to Gunsmoke McGonigle. There was an acrid, sneering smile on the fellow's cold lips. In mock apology he said, "I'm sorry if we've come here and accused innocent people, cowboy.

We'll get the guilty parties some other time, maybe." It was mingled warning, regret, and caustic humor.

Gunsmoke McGonigle quietly inclined his head and replied, "Some other time, Hammer," and his tone was prophetic. But his meaning wasn't the same as Cord's.

The mounted party reined about and rode away. When it had disappeared into the mesquite, Smoke turned once more to Sulie Prather.

"Why did you do it?" he asked her.

She told him calmly, "It was a fib to prevent bloodshed. Even a preacher would countenance such an act."

Old Luke Kaley chuckled and agreed. "Yeah, I don't reckon anybody in this world or the next could ever blame you for telling a white one like that."

"It was brave and quick-witted of you to dash to our help like that," Smoke told her.

With a queer little smile she retorted, "Are you sure it was for you?"

His mouth flattened. His eyes became like little swirling pools of smoke. Bitterly the cowboy blurted, "Oh, I see! You were scared to death that me and my partner would pitch a few hot slugs into your boy friend, huh?"

Again the slim form stiffened and the smooth chin went up. The red lips were very tight over small, white teeth. For a few seconds she glared at him, and then said angrily, "I hate you!" Wheeling, she went stamping angrily away toward the house.

Luke Kaley chuckled. McGonigle's lean jaws were hard for a moment as he gazed somberly at the stiff little back, and then he too burst into a laugh—a crazy sort of laugh.

Luke quoted, "When a gal says she hates a feller, says it like Sulie did, it's a purty good sign she likes him a heap."

McGonigle's face went grim again. "It's not true in her case," he denied curtly.

CHAPTER IX

LIGHTNING SIXES

THE two punchers rode into town again that night. Judge Hugh J. Alberts found excuse to quit his job long enough to meet secretly and talk with them. "There's still plotting going on between the Hammers and Duke Brandon," he confided. "This time they conferred in Duke's private office, though, and so I have no idea what the talk was about."

They thanked him for the information, asked him to continue keeping ears and eyes open. Then they went to see the sheriff. The rock-jawed lawman wagged his big head worriedly when they had told of the raid on the pigeon coops, and the ruckus at the Cloverleaf 3.

"I'm sorry you had gun trouble with 'em," he said. "That'll make the wolves all the harder to trap. And the pigeons—well, at least we know now there's something mysterious in connection with them. I wonder what?"

"Happen to know a jigger name of Quincey?" Gunsmoke asked.

"Pike Quincey? Why, yes; that is, I know of him. He runs a notorious cantina down in Tres Palos. Suspected smuggler, renegade, outfitter for desperadoes, go-between for bandits and revolutionists—all around bad hombre. How come you ask?"

Smoke explained. The sheriff frowned and stroked his blunt chin. "Um-m! And so he's the power on the other end of the line, huh? And colored pigeons! I wonder what the Sam Hill! Guess I'll mosey out to the Fork H and have another look at them birds right soon. Colored pigeons! But it has always been the white ones we've seen in the air."

"Yeah, that's what gets me," McGonigle sighed.

"Quincey's dive—on the other side! Hum-mph! Wish I was free to go over there and investigate, but I can't. My badge won't permit."

"Well, I don't wear a star, and I'm going," snapped Gunsmoke McGonigle.

The heavy-jawed sheriff gazed at him for a long time in silence. The astute lawman realized that it would be useless for him to argue against the plan, and so he merely warned, "Be mighty careful, cowboy. If they get hep to you your life won't be worth shucks."

"I won't go prodding openly into a hornet's nest."

A short time later the two waddies left by way of the rear door—the same way they had entered. They circled to their horses, mounted, and rode quietly away into the night.

The hands at the Cloverleaf 3 ate at the family table. Smoke and his pal did not see Consuelo Prather at breakfast the next morning. She had decided to take a ride in the refreshing coolness which preceded sunup. Mrs. Prather told them. Gunsmoke McGonigle stared hard at the frail little woman, but she looked guileless.

If there were some deep purpose behind the girl's unusually early morning ride, Mrs. Prather apparently knew nothing about it. Smoke was just a little puzzled that Sulie had made no mention of the raid on the Fork H pigeon-house. He had expected that she would ask many questions in that direction.

He and Luke performed routine duties until mid-afternoon, and then Gunsmoke said, "Well, I'll start moseying toward the Rio Grande. I aim to reach Quincey's cantina about dusk. I'd like to have a look at his pigeons by daylight."

Old Luke spat tobacco juice aside, squinted one eye toward the sun and replied, "Yeah, I reckon we better be gettin' along."

"We?"

"Shore, you didn't think for a minute I was goin' to let you enjoy all the fun alone? Shucks, no—I'm trottin' right along with you."

"But what about the women? They shouldn't be left at the ranch unprotected. You should stay in the bunkhouse and sort of guard—"

"They won't be to home. Sulie was absent from the table again at noontime, as you maybe noticed." He said the last four words sarcastically. "After you'd stomped out, though, she come in and told me that her and Miz Prather were spendin' the night with friends in town. She said that it would be up to us to fix our own supper tonight, and breakfast in the mornin'. So I'm goin' with you."

Smoke grinned, gave the lanky ex-ranger a good-natured poke in the ribs with a rock-hard fist. "All right, you danged old maverick, come on. We'll have that supper in Tres Palos."

They were riding leisurely along through the breaks, when of a sudden old Luke Kaley remarked, "There they are again." Smoke glanced up; his eyes followed his pal's line of gaze. A flock of pigeons were coming out of Mexico, winging their way toward the Fork H ranch.

"Yep, and they're all white, you'll notice. That's what gets me. From what I heard the other night, the Hammers are concerned only about the colored ones. We've never yet seen one of them in flight."

"Uh-huh, it's right puzzlin'. But like most puzzles, I reckon she'll be plumb simple when we solve her."

"Maybe we'll find the solution at the other end of the bird trail."

"Maybe we'll find a lot of things."

THE sun was low as they splashed their broncs across the broad, shallow ford. Small, golden sprays and showers played about the legs of their wading horses. And then they climbed a wide stretch of mellow sand, followed a winding trail that led through the chaparral.

It was dusk when they entered the 'dobe pueblo of Tres Palos. The whole place lay in somnolent apathy. A few

ponies and burros dozed at hitchracks. Game chickens wandered about, picking now and then. A few lean pigs foraged along the dirty street. Peons dozed against walls and in doorways. The only sign of animation was in the form of a flock of dirty, half-naked children who were playing hide-and-seek among the shacks and store buildings.

"Looks harmless enough," observed Luke.

Smoke replied acridly, "Yeah, so does a sleeping tiger, until he's prodded. These sleepy, lazy pueblos can become roaring, blasting hellholes within an instant, podner."

Luke chuckled. "Don't I know it? I ain't exactly a greenhorn on the border, you know. Fact, I was ridin' the line when you was suckin' your thumb and sayin' goo-goo."

Smoke gave him a withering look, and they rode on.

They did not ask for directions to Quincey's cantina. They did not want to show themselves to be total strangers in Tres Palos. But when they had traversed the entire extent of the main street without seeing a sign which would identify the place, Smoke said to his friend, "Humph! Looks like we might have to ask somebody, after all."

"Look, maybe that's her over there." Luke pointed to a big, square, two-story adobe building which stood within a grove of giant cottonwoods.

Gunsmoke McGonigle leaned forward in his saddle and peered intently. He had the eyes of a hawk, and soon he announced, "Yeah, that's it. I can make out some of the big letters painted across its face."

A lazy looking gringo was sitting humped in the doorway, smoking a cigarette as they approached. He got up, stretched, and stepped out of sight into the building. But despite the show of sluggish indifference he had put on, the partners knew that he had gone to give news of the approach of two strangers.

They found only a few people within the place. In the back part of the great room was a lunch counter. They had drinks, then went and ordered ham and eggs, and potatoes, from a dagger-eyed highly painted señorita.

They asked to be allowed to wash up. A slovenly, seemingly speechless dishwasher conducted them to a back room — just as Smoke had hoped would happen. The fellow motioned to washpans, soap, a bucket of water and a dirty towel. They fell to—lathering, scrubbing, snorting.

Through suds and a dingy window Gunsmoke McGonigle saw a pigeon-house, like the one at the Fork H ranch. He also saw that it was guarded by a Mexican who sat in a nearby doorway. He cleaned his glowing face of lather and looked around. The dishwasher was gone. Smoke whispered to Luke:

"No chance to examine the birds by daylight. After night, though, we'll take care of that watchman, then have a look-see inside the coop."

"I hope we don't stop too much lead while doin' it," muttered Luke.

The food was very good. The two cowboys ate slowly, despite their wolfish appetites, for they had a good deal of time to kill. A chunky man with nearly white eyes, a blond mustache, and a forced smile came and asked them if everything was all right. They assured him that it was. He introduced himself—Pike Quincey, proprietor of the place—and his pale eyes drilled the two waddies interrogatively. They merely nodded, and ate on.

Quincey sat down and pretended to be sociable—grinning, asking seemingly casual questions. They realized, however, that he was trying to get a line on two men whom his experienced eyes had spotted as lead slingers. Smoke did all the answering. His innuendo and ambiguous replies left Pike Quincey baffled, just as had been the case with the Hammers when they first had interrogated the cowboy.

Darkness came, and the two waddies quietly left the dive. They cir-

cled and came up to the pigeon-house. Just as they had expected would happen, the guard immediately appeared. He held a rifle and he challenged them sharply. Smoke approached the fellow casually. "It's all right," he said. "We're in the know. You're supposed to let the colored pigeons go tonight."

"Huh? At night? The boss say so?" He eyed them more closely. "Who are you, anyway? I no see you before. I call the boss. I—"

Smoke was close now, and like a bobcat he sprang. His left hand knocked the rifle aside. His right drew a six-shooter. "Not a cheep out of you, hombre, or I'll have to shoot! Let go the Winchester!"

The fellow tried to jerk the rifle away, and his mouth opened to voice a cry for help. Smoke hit out with his gun. The Mexican slumped.

They bound and gagged him with neckerchiefs, then hurried into the pigeon-house. Smoke tore a piece of lathing from a wall and made a torch. Dangerous business. Anyone passing that would surely have seen the light! As luck would have it, though, the two waddies made a complete inspection of the two-roomed pigeon-house in peace. Not a thing out of the way did they find.

McGonigle grinned and plucked a quill from the tail of a dark blue, almost black pigeon. "A souvenir for the sheriff," he said, "to show him we really did go bird-hunting tonight."

THEY left the place, again baffled. But once more Gunsmoke McGonigle had the feeling that there was some deeply sinister business in connection with those pigeons; that they in some way stood for crime, subtle trickery, even death!

In the meantime unbeknown to the two waddies new danger had cut their trail. Danger in the form of the Hammers and a rat-faced killer from Sonora. The Hammers had just entered the dive. Pike Quincey introduced the little gunny, told his allies that the fellow was widely traveled, gun-wise, keen of brain—just the kind of man the Hammers needed.

At this juncture McGonigle and Luke walked back into the cantina. The ex-ranger had left his quirt on the lunch counter. The barroom was fairly well crowded now, and so the partners did not see the little group of plotters at a table near the back part of the barroom.

As they turned and started to leave, the gunny noticed them. His little black eyes showed leaping interest.

"Look!" he exclaimed softly. "Gunsmoke McGonigle! Does he work for you folks? For if he does you've certainly got a good man. That waddy is chain lightning with his sixes."

Both the Hammers had tensed. Cord now started half up from the table. His glance flew to the two cowboys who were walking down the room.

"McGonigle?" he blurted.

"Yes, Gunsmoke McGonigle. You've heard of him I see—and no wonder, if you've traveled in Mexico much. He was right noted while ridin' range up in Sonora. People there are a-wonderin' what became of him."

Cord Hammer muttered hoarsely, the while he ran fingertips along the ragged scar on his left cheek, "McGonigle! Gunsmoke McGonigle! Terry McGonigle! No wonder we saw something familiar in that face, Dad!"

And then his blue eyes flamed. Throughout the years there had been venom in his heart because of the scar on his cheek, the scar which he considered a serious blemish to an otherwise handsome face. He straightened his splendid form and dropped a hand to his pistol.

Instantly the rat-faced killer grabbed Cord's wrist and said, "Hell, no, fella!—if you're thinkin' of guntanglin' with Gunsmoke McGonigle! That waddy is lightning, I tell you!"

"He's right," Sledge Hammer urged swiftly. "He took Duke Brandon, you know, and Duke is fast. You won't be trying to out-trigger a printer boy this time, but Gunsmoke McGonigle, a

waddy who has steel wires for nerves and lightning in both hands. Wait and we'll get him from trailside."

"I'm taking him right here," Cord gritted. "Matching my drawhand against his. I've wished a long time for this chance. Now that I've got it I don't aim to let it pass."

He took one step away from the table—and then bad luck for McGonigle and Luke struck again. The pigeon guard had regained consciousness, managed to free himself from his insecure bindings, and now he came hurrying into the cantina, a rifle in his hands.

"Señor Queencey!" he cried. "They knock me cold, then go eento the peegon house!"

There were snarled ejaculations, for every man in that dive at the moment was an ally of the Hammer-Brandon-Quincey crime organization. Reaching for hardware, gunnies came up from tables. Pike Quincey was cursing softly. The rifleman, still a little goofy from the blow he had suffered, pitched his Winchester to his shoulder and fired.

Gunsmoke McGonigle heard a *pip* in his hat crown. Felt a bullet wing through his hair. It flew on and bored a hole through a wall. The attack coming so suddenly had caught him and Luke unprepared. Both seasoned adventurers, they were quick to act in the emergency, however. Their guns flew into their hands. They both fired, then whirled, ran to the lunch counter, vaulted over it, ducked, went pounding through the back door. In the barroom two gunnies were moaning now, one nursing a wounded shoulder, the other a bleeding hand.

In the excitement of the moment the whole gang in the barroom surged impulsively after the two waddies, givin no thought to the fact that the cowboy's horses were out front. This was a break for Smoke and Luke. They ran around the building, hastily got into leather, and went streaking away. But a mounted band was quickly on their tails. Guns began popping and lead whistled about them. They did not return the fire, but gave all their attention to hard riding.

Anxiously their eyes watched the course of the Rio Grande. Would they make it? Once more they looked behind.

"Some of 'em are catchin' up with us," muttered Luke. "Naturally a few of the cayuses in that bunch are faster than ours. Shall we hole up and make a fight of it?"

"What chance would we have against so many? No, we must keep high-tailing—and hope."

"Okay, podner, but I think they'll catch us. The river won't stop 'em."

CHAPTER X

The Waiting Notch

THE Rio Grande came out of the night, a broad streak of silver. The two cowboys hit the water at full speed, and this time it was silver spray which flew. Bullets made small, chugging sounds all about them. Smoke and Luke were returning the fire now. Before, the shooting of the pursuers had been wild, for accurate six-gunning can not be done from running horses at night from any considerable distance. Now, though, it was hot and dangerous.

"Looks like we ain't goin' to outride 'em, podner," said Luke. "Let's hole up on the other bank and try to fight 'em back while they're in the river."

At that instant rifle fire broke out on the east shore. It came from a flank, and it sent horses dropping and floundering into the stream. "Friends!" whooped Luke. "Thank gosh! I wonder who it can be!"

"Sheriff John Clants and a deputy, maybe. Clants said he'd like to help out in tonight's investigation, but that his badge wouldn't permit him to cross the river."

Riders were piling up back there in the Rio Grande. Oaths, shouts of rage, a terrific sloshing and splashing, gunfire—the night was a bedlam. During that moment of surprise and confusion the two waddies tore out of the stream, up a sandbank, and into the chaparral. Immediately the shooting ceased.

"Evidently the stinkers are high-tailin' it back," muttered Luke Kaley. "Nice of our unknown friends not to keep pouring lead into them while they're exposed out there."

They swung around through the brush and made toward the spot from which the rifle fire had come. They reared their mounts to a halt as two men with Winchesters in their hands stepped suddenly out of a nest of snaggled rocks and confronted them.

Gunsmoke McGonigle called cheerfully, "John Clants and Judge Alberts! Gosh, are we glad to see you two gents! Quincey's gang likely would have got us if you hadn't started cracking down."

"We had an idea you might need help, so we moseyed down this way," growled the sheriff. "What happened over there?"

Smoke told him. The lawman muttered, "Um-m, more pigeons! There's something in connection with them, but for the life of me I can't imagine what it is. I went out to the Fork H and examined those colored birds today, but found no clue to the mystery. I got the idea that Cord Hammer was mocking me all the time while he was showing me the birds."

"We'll keep on investigating until we get to the bottom of the whole thing," Smoke declared.

"It'll be harder from now on, more dangerous for you, since the Hammers know your real identity. You'd better watch your step, cowboy. I'll warn them that if they jump you, or lay a trap for you—"

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"No man can take care of himself if he rides into an ambush such as that gang might lay. Yeah, I'll warn them."

It still was quite early in the night, so McGonigle and Luke rode into Texton with Clants and the judge. Alberts turned his mount over to the sheriff and slipped away to the Crazy Horse Saloon, there to take up his regular post at the card table. Smoke accompanied Clants to the town stable, so as to have a few last words with him while the sheriff was putting up his own and the judge's mounts. Luke had stopped off at a pool hall, and had said that he would wait for McGonigle there.

The two men parted company a short time later, John Clants heading for his office, Gunsmoke McGonigle moseying thoughtfully along the street, smoking a cigarette. But this time his mood was not one of abstraction. Remembering attacks upon him in that town, he was very alert. The public didn't know that it was a gang led by Tesro who had beaten him up one night; that it was the Hammers who had slugged him in the hotel room. But after tonight— "All the black kittens will be out of the bag at one and the same time," he thought.

HE arrived opposite the Crazy Horse Saloon and stopped. Sounds of bawdy revelry were coming from over there. He saw a tall, straight shadow moving along beneath the porch awnings. It turned in at the saloon, pushed the batwing doors apart. Smoke had just a glimpse of Duke Brandon, and then the man disappeared.

The cowboy took a long pull at his cigarette, sent smoke trickling through his nose. A hard, thin smile formed little crinkles at the corners of his eyes and his mouth. His right hand strayed into the inside pocket of his brush-jacket and fingered the quill which he had plucked from a pigeon's tail, over on the other side of the line. He had forgotten to give that little souvenir of adventure to John Clants. Now, acting upon a reckless

impulse, he headed straight across the street and toward the double doors of Duke Brandon's dive—a place which he knew was very dangerous for him.

Gunsmoke McGonigle stepped slowly into the place, pushed back his Stetson, and stood with thumbs hooked in the waistband of his Levis. As men noticed him a stunned hush swiftly settled over the room. The Crazy Horse was supposed to be a forbidden place for him, since his fistic encounter with the gambler on the first day of his arrival in Texton. Naturally, now, his coming there portended excitement.

Even Judge Hugh J. Alberts had ceased to move. Smoke saw a question in the man's eyes. The waddy did not attempt to answer it with his own.

He looked toward the bar. Duke Brandon, immaculate as ever, was standing behind it and between two white-coated tenders. He had frozen in the act of taking a drink.

McGonigle's cold eyes flickered, and with a mere ghost of a smile on his thin lips he went slowly to the rail, leaned easily on it and looked into Brandon's thin face.

The dive owner suddenly came alive. He whacked his glass onto the bar and rapped out, "What're you doing in my place, gunny? You know you're about as welcome as a lobo in a chicken-house!"

Smoke's chilling smile spread just a little. The frosty eyes narrowed. Very softly he said, "Or a pigeon-house?"

Instantly Brandon's visage became marble. The black eyes glowed in a startled way. For just a moment he gazed speechlessly, and then in a low, deliberate tone he asked, "Meaning just what?"

Carelessly Smoke took the pigeon feather from his inside pocket, absently flicked the rail with it. "Oh, nothing in particular." He put his tongue into one cheek, looked up from under arched brows, and grinned mysteriously.

Brandon was staring at the feather as if fascinated. It was almost coal black there in the lamplight. For the gambler it obviously held sinister portent. He was reading dreadful meaning from seeing it within the mocking cowboy's possession.

His eyes were intensely questioning as he raised them to the bleak, sardonic ones in the waddy's bronzed face. In that same velvety voice that was scarcely above a whisper Smoke suggested, "Shall we have a little private powwow—in your office?"

Duke Brandon continued to gaze at him for a moment, then gulped and bobbed his head in agreement. He wheeled and went striding down the room. McGonigle followed him, slouching along like a lazy cat.

It had been mostly a rash whim that had carried Gunsmoke McGonigle into the Crazy Horse. It had seemed unlikely that he could profit much by trying to bluff the trick-wise, flinty-faced gambler. Now suddenly, though, he was believing that his little game might produce an important win for him. He was planning rapidly as he followed Duke Brandon.

THE owner of the Crazy Horse dropped into a chair at a table and motioned Smoke to one opposite him. The waddy sat down, squared himself around so that his right-hand gun was easily accessible. He still held the blue-black feather, and he began idly flicking the edge of an ashtray with it. Surreptitiously he was watching Brandon from under the lowered brim of his Stetson.

After a moment of silence that must have been nerve straining to Duke Brandon, the man prompted gruffly, "Well?"

Smoke's face came up then, and there were taunting devils in his eyes. In the velvety, slightly sibilant voice which held such alarming innuendo—such mocking suggestion—he told the slim, stiff-backed gambling man:

"The game's up, Brandon."

"The—the game? What are you talking about?"

"You know very well. But what you don't know is that I went across the line tonight, to Pike Quincey's place. I ran into your pals over there. I captured the Mex keeper of the pigeons. I went through the cages. I did a lot of things."

He paused and grinned knowingly. Brandon had donned a stone mask, but again Smoke saw him swallow hard, knew thereby that the fellow was excited.

Brandon tried to hold his tone even and emotionless as he said, "Meaning just what?"

Gunsmoke McGonigle tossed the colored feather in front of the dive owner and said, "You ought to know. Once I report my findings to the sheriff—yeah, the game is up, Brandon. You might help yourself by coming along with me to the sheriff and confessing everything."

It was a colossal bluff. McGonigle didn't expect it to be entirely successful, but he did hope that in shooting at the bull's-eye he would at least score something. He was mildly surprised when Duke Brandon said hurriedly, "All right, I'll come clean. I'll put it in writing. But you must promise me—"

"Hold it!"

Gunsmoke McGonigle had seen poison suddenly gleam in the black eyes. Brandon had slid his long, pale hands from the table edge and to a shallow drawer in front of him. Through the waddy's mind had leaped suspicion that the fellow was about to draw a gun, not writing materials.

Brandon's lips flicked away from set teeth. He cursed and jerked the drawer. The thunder of a shot jarred the room. That shot had come from a pistol hidden within the drawer, and rigged so as to hurl lead straight forward from under the table. He hadn't dared try for his hip gun.

As McGonigle had yapped at Brandon to hold it, his lithe form had bounded aside and one leg had reached out in a stride to get around a corner of the table. The bullet brushed past his right hip and smashed into the top slat of the chair-back.

Both McGonigle's six-shooters flew from leather, the right one first. As the muzzles of the weapons jumped up, the now ashen-faced gambler ducked. The short gun bellowed. A slug tore up a row of splinters in front of the place where the fear-frozen visage had been an instant before.

With a jerk Duke Brandon overturned the table so as to have some protection for himself, and perhaps hoping also to extinguish the light. But the brass lamp merely suffered a broken chimney. It rolled across the room, brought up against a wall. For an instant the light wavered and darkness almost closed in, then a flame sprang up and began to grow. The cap had been twisted aside and kerosene was oozing out.

Meanwhile vivid action was going on within the room. While the place was shrouded in gloom the two men had been firing. Jets of flame came over the top of the upset table. It seemed to McGonigle that ghostly fingers were jerking at his clothing. His own guns were pounding as he sprang nimbly about, and he could hear a steady hammering of lead. Altogether it was an infernal din.

And then as the flame from the burning lamp sprang higher, lighting the office with a weird glare, Duke Brandon lost his nerve and began yelling surrender. Gunsmoke McGonigle did not trust the man. He feared a trick. The cowboy was near the up-edged table now, and with a bound he went over it, spurred heels gathered under him, a Colt forty-five gripped in each fist.

ON one elbow, like a trapped beast, Brandon looked up and saw him coming. He snarled and tipped up his pistol for another shot, then McGonigle hit him. One boot crashed aside the six-shooter and the hand which held it, so that the load went

through the ceiling. The other stomped against Brandon's chin. The man's head thumped hard against the floor. McGonigle stumbled on and careened against a wall.

Outside there was wild excitement. Voices were yapping and feet were scurrying. The door flew open and men came pouring in. At the forefront of the crowd were Judge Alberts and Luke Kaley. Duke Brandon was lying on the floor, stunned. McGonigle was standing crouched against a wall, a Colt forty-five gripped in each brown fist. Men were craning necks. Some of them sprang to put out the fire. A bartender brought a fresh light.

Luke Kaley said to his pal, "From up the street I seen you come in here, and figured something might happen. How come the gunfight?"

At that moment there was a jostling in the crowd. Sheriff John Clants came shoving into the room. "Yeah, what happened?" he demanded authoritatively.

Duke Brandon was picking himself up now. McGonigle said tersely, "I was having a little private talk with the scamp, when he tried to murder me with a trick gun rigged up in the table drawer. Better bring him along to your office, sheriff. I think he has something he wants to tell you."

The waddy quickly saw his hope in that direction go glimmering. He found that he had not bluffed the man to a point of disclosing secrets of the Hammer-Brandon-Quincey gangs.

"Sure, I've got something to tell," growled Duke Brandon, as he wiped blood from the cut on his chin, "but I can say it right here. The waddy tried to hold me up, to make me unlock the safe. He had a dead drop on me, so I used the gun I'd rigged in the drawer for just such an emergency."

"Come along, both of you," John Clants ordered quietly. "We can thrash the whole thing out down at my place."

But both men stuck to their stories, and since there were no witnesses except themselves, Clants released Brandon. When the gambler had returned to his dive, McGonigle gave

the lawman all the facts in the case. Clants remarked, "Not being sure just how far you were bluffing, he intended to shut your mouth and at the same time get revenge so he tried to kill you. What do you want me to do next?"

"Just sit tight—let things ride," replied Smoke. "I played that hand out. Now we'll shuffle the cards and wait for the next deal."

Smoke was glum as he and Luke headed for the home ranch. Now with his identity known, would the Hammers make it tough for the Prathers? Of course they might claim that they had been unaware of his true identity, but the ever suspicious Hammers

probably wouldn't believe. At any rate they would demand that he be fired. And what would Sulie do? The cowboy grimly decided that he would have a complete showdown with her when she returned to the ranch in the morning.

The two waddies alternately stood guard that night, for they had expected the Hammers to come there. But they were not disturbed.

The Prathers returned at mid-morning. The mother went straight into the house. Luke was pretending to busy himself at the horse corral. Smoke soberly told Sulie of the happenings of the night. He explained everything and then added, "If Luke and I stayed on here it would get you in bad with the Hammers, and so—"

"You're staying," she told him decisively. "I guess my game with Cord was about played out anyway."

"Game?"

She nodded. "I'd been in school for quite a while when Father died. After I took over the ranch Cord made a play for me. I wanted to help trap that band, so I tolerated his unwelcome attentions." She smiled coldly. "He told me you tried to drygulch him in that fight ten years ago, and I pretended to believe him. Cord Hammer hasn't fooled me for an instant."

"Then why did you spy on us when we were examining those pigeons we killed the other day?" The question had come flatly. His eyes were cold and drilling, but she did not cringe before his stare.

"Because I'd heard shooting, and went to investigate. I didn't want you to know of my game—yet—so I ran away. I wanted to be present when you fellows inspected the pigeons at the ranch, though, and I arranged it accordingly."

"Why haven't you confided in your friends before?"

"Because my game was a deep and dangerous one. I was afraid that if I took my friends into my confidence somebody might in some way inadvertently tip off the Hammers. In that case, there's no telling what might happen to me."

THE expected visit from the Hammers came shortly past midday. Sulie Prather met them at the front door. She did not ask them into the house, knowing very well that they had come for a showdown. They were quick to notice her unaccustomed coldness, and doubtless to guess the reason for it.

Sledge Hammer growled bluntly, "Sulie Prather, we've found out that the two-gunner you've got working here is Terry McGonigle, the young skunk who tried to murder Cord ten years ago. We've come to tell you that you've got to get rid of him."

Frail Mrs. Prather stood listening anxiously a few feet behind her daughter. She called in a trembling whisper, "Oh, honey, do be careful!"

The girl laid a hand confidently on a shotgun which stood against the door frame near her right side. She said in reply to Sledge Hammer's growled statement, "Terry McGonigle, eh? Where'd you get your information, Mr. Hammer?"

"Over in Mexico," blurted Sledge.

"Is that so? What were you doing in Mexico?"

The two men exchanged glances. Sledge's big face was slightly red. Cord's scarred one was a bit pale with anger.

Sledge snarled, "Went over to warn that fellow Quincey that we suspect him of rustling Fork H beef. McGonigle and that long-legged pard of his were in the dive. McGonigle was recognized by a gunny from Sonora. Then a Mex came in and yelped that your two waddies konked him and robbed him. Quincey's gang chased the pair clean across the border."

"And just why do you want me to get rid of McGonigle?"

"We don't want a fellow of his stripe so close to our spread. If he ain't up to some devilment, why did he

call himself Smoky Davis, and try to get a job on the Fork H?"

"Terry McGonigle stays. He's an old friend of mine. He changed his name at the sheriff's request—to keep from having trouble with you two."

Cord's eyes seemed to snap. "Oh, so you've known who he was all along? You were stuck on him when he was a yellow printer's pup—you still are. It's easy to see you were working with him against us. I guess you think you've made a fool out of me but you haven't. You'll see."

He then went into a bitter, blistering tirade. His father joined him from time to time, snarling deep in his throat. Threats were hurled—and then came interruption.

Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke Kaley had been watching and waiting inside the house. When they had seen the Hammers coming they had slipped out the back door. As the two Fork H men had come stomping down the walk, Smoke and his partner had wheeled away in opposite directions and circled toward the front of the house. Now they stepped suddenly from behind the two front corners.

Cord and Sledge jerked visibly. Their glances shuttled between the two menacing cowboys. Old Luke was perfectly cool. His hard jaws worked methodically as he chewed tobacco. His long mustache moved gently in the warm breeze. But once more Gunsmoke McGonigle was like a clean-limbed, ferocious young tiger—and no wonder. The men who had murdered his uncle—and perhaps his father—also the one who had tried to kill him ten years ago were before him. They had been bemeaning and threatening the girl he loved. There was a snap to his voice as he said:

"Sulie didn't make a fool out of you, Cord Hammer. You always were one—also a skunk, like your murdering dad. Now skeedaddle, both of you. And get this, if you think you're going to do any terrorizing around this ranch you'd better forget it. If you try it, you'll get shot. Now travel, you polecats."

Sledge Hammer's eyes glowed like molten copper. Cord's were like ice. Sledge was more battle-wise than his hot-headed son. Taking a glance to the right, another to the left, he swallowed hard and said, "Come on, son, they've got us this time—could butcher us with crossfire. We'll wait, and shoot it out with them sometime later."

"You mean you'll set a drygulch trap for us later," sneered Smoke.

"I'll be damned if I'll wait," husked Cord, his voice shaky with fury. "I've hoped for this chance a long time, and I'm going to have it out with McGonigle. You'll have to take care of that long-legged jackass at the other corner." Cord went into a slight crouch then, shoulders hunched. The scar across his cheek was a livid gash. His lips twisted away from his set teeth, and he snarled, "Draw, you—"

"Stop it!" Sulie's voice rang out like a bell—a very determined bell. All eyes shot toward her. Her dark eyes were flashing, and there were angry red spots on her otherwise pale cheeks. Her lips were thinned to a pink line. Cord Hammer again started visibly, for she was holding a shotgun, and it was pointed straight at his breast. "Travel, you Hammers!" she clicked out. "Get off this ranch, and stay off."

"All right, Cord, let's go," said Sledge.

Cord straightened his big form slowly, took a deep breath. There was hell in his eyes. He licked dry lips. Suddenly he whirled and went stamping away down the walk. Sledge followed him. They flung themselves astride leather.

Cord fairly shouted, "You'll regret this day, Sulie Prather! And as for you two hairpins—it's war between us from now on." He whirled his mount then, and went riding furiously away. With him rode his rock crag of a dad.

CHAPTER XI

TROUBLE ON THE RIO GRANDE

MUCH to the surprise of everyone at the Cloverleaf 3, all was quiet there during the next few days. The Hammers gave them no trouble. "Maybe it's because the sheriff warned them he was going to hold them responsible if anything happened to us," Gunsmoke McGonigle told his friends. "He said he was going to do that."

"In which case they're just waiting until they can see a chance to gun us out, and at the same time have an alibi," opined Luke Kaley.

Since all had been so quiet at the ranch, Sulie had not hired other hands. But of a sudden cattle began to disappear. She told Smoke and Luke, "The rustling must stop, or Mother and I will be in desperate circumstances."

Smoke said grimly, "The quickest, surest way would be for me to ride straight to the Fork H and shoot the daylights out of the Hammers."

"Get that idea out of your head," Sulie admonished him hurriedly. "They probably hope you'll try just that, so they can kill you and have an out. We have no absolute proof of their guilt, you know."

It proved to be good advice. The very next day McGonigle and Luke found the missing cattle grazing peacefully within a hidden valley. A fallen tree had closed the single narrow entrance. The cowboys found upon inspection that dynamite had caused the tree's fall.

"Foxy scheme," growled Luke. "Knowing they'd be suspected immediately, the Hammers didn't dare steal the herd, so they just penned the cows here. The purpose was twoply—to worry Sulie, and to bring us rantin' to their spread, where they could kill us and then claim self-defense."

They pulled the tree away with their lass-ropes, then rode in and hazed the cattle out. Sulie was both delighted and worried when she heard the news. "You see how cunning they are. We must be very careful."

The next morning while he and his partner were riding range McGonigle made a startling discovery. He jabbed out a finger and barked, "Look! The colored pigeons in flight—at last!"

"Some of 'em, at least," muttered Luke. "About half the flock is white—the rest colored."

"Let's hightail to the crest of yonder hill and watch the Fork H through our glasses!" Smoke raked his mount with the rowels.

The two cowboys witnessed a strange happening. A man popped out of the shack which was near the wire netting. He ran to the cages, peered at the newly arrived birds, then wheeled and went running toward the house. He disappeared indoors, only to come out a moment later, followed by a second man.

Smoke muttered, "That other jasper is Sledge Hammer, judging by his bulk."

The two hurried down to the cages, and now they stared for a moment. Slowly they turned, stood talking for a while. Finally Sledge went striding toward the house. The guard disappeared into the shack.

"Humph!" mumbled Smoke McGonigle. "They seemed right excited about the birds. And yet, all they did was look at them through the netting. Didn't even lay a hand on any of them."

"She's a humdinger of a mystery," declared Luke.

They watched the ranch until noontime, saw riders come in off the range and troop away to the cookshack. When the gang emerged from the midday meal the whole ranch became a scene of hustling activity. Some of the men went immediately to the

horse corral, saddled up, and rode away toward Texton. Others disappeared into the bunkhouse, no doubt to "dude up" a little before hitting the trail. But when they did ride, they too headed toward town. And still no one had handled a single one of the pigeons.

"It's evident the birds didn't bring nothin' on 'em, since they weren't touched. Yet their arrival created a lot of excitement down there at the Hammer ranch," muttered the old ex-ranger, as he tugged thoughtfully at his mustache. "What the heck does it mean? I'd shore like to ride down there and have a look-see inside the cages myself, but half a dozen of the gang stayed at the ranch."

"Suppose we take a ride into town?" suggested Smoke. "Trail those riders in? Maybe we'll get some idea of what's up?"

"Smart thought, but we must watch our steps. With that gang in Texton, we might have to shoot our way out."

McGonigle muttered a little worriedly, "Sulie and her mother were going into town for the mail this morning. I hope they don't run into Cord Hammer—not before we get there, anyway."

"Maybe this is the day we shoot her out with them two, huh?"

"Not we this time, podner—just me! They're both mine."

WHEN they rode into Texton their keen eyes noted at once that Fork H broncs were packed like sardines along the hitchrack in front of the Crazy Horse Saloon. The two waddies were hawklike in their alertness as they rode along, for they realized that the tough town might be dynamite for them at that particular moment.

As they passed the Crazy Horse they heard sounds of rough hilarity. Already the first of the Fork H riders to arrive there, were feeling their liquor. Two fellows lurched out of the place, and instinctively the two riders halted short, hands dropping to gun butts, but the other men paid them no heed. Perhaps they were not Fork H men. They went stomping down the sidewalk and entered a pool hall.

McGonigle's quick eyes noted an important looking figure strolling along from the direction of a hotel; a big man who wore a soft black hat, a flowing black tie, a cream-colored vest, and a long black coat. Smoke grinned. "There's Judge Alberts," he told his saddle pard. "Doesn't he look for all the world like a congressman?"

Luke sent a jet of tobacco juice aside. He dragged the back of a bony hand across his lips, then remarked dryly, "Yeah, a congressman at large. One that shouldn't be at large." Then he chuckled.

Smoke called from a corner of his mouth as they rode slowly past the gambler, "Hey, judge, mosey back to the sheriff's office after a while. We want to make powwow."

The big man nodded without looking at them, and went strolling on.

Smoke McGonigle had been looking for the Prather buckboard, and now he spotted it standing in front of the post office. As the waddies approached the vehicle the two women came out. The cowboys paused to warn them that the Hammer gang was in town, drinking hard, and that perhaps it would be just as well if Sulie and her mother hit the trail for the home ranch at once.

"If Cord Hammer happens to be here with the outfit, he may try to get high-handed with you again," Smoke told Sulie.

"We don't want to be the cause of any trouble," the girl said seriously. "We'll go just as soon as we've bought a few necessaries at Simpson's general store."

"All right, go ahead and do your shopping. Luke and I want to powwow with the law for a few minutes, then we'll trail you home." They touched their Stetsons and rode away.

Once more they called at John Clants' office cautiously, by way of the

back door. This time they did not find him in. He was up at the Crazy Horse, keeping an eye on the rowdies there, a deputy told them. "I'll go take his place, though, and send him down here," the lawman said.

Gunsmoke McGonigle stationed himself at a place where he could watch the front door of the general merchandise establishment wherein Sulie and her mother were doing their shopping. He still was afraid that Sulie might be approached and threatened by Cord Hammer.

Judge Hugh J. Alberts came in, also by way of the back door. "The political and religious situation in this town is becoming very bad," he remarked, as he carefully gathered up the tail of his long black coat and sat down.

Luke Kaley chortled and said, "You old scalawag. I'll bet them hidden shootin' irons of yours, and the frawg sticker down your back, are all primed for trouble."

The judge glared at him, then looked at McGonigle. He winked and said, "Luke just will have his little jokes."

AT that moment the sheriff entered the office, and the four men got right down to business. Smoke told about the happenings at the Fork H that day. The judge pursed his lips, nodded and remarked, "I was in the Crazy Horse when that first batch of Fork H riders entered the place. Cord Hammer was with 'em. He and Duke Brandon immediately went into conference in the private office. There seemed to be an undercurrent of eager excitement about the whole outfit. Pigeons! And yet they apparently don't carry contraband or messages. Um-m! In all my political career I've never come in contact with anything so puzzling."

"I reckon that's because your political career has kept your nose stuck close to a deck of cards," Luke told him dryly.

"I guess it'll be useless," sighed John Clants, "but maybe I'd better ride out there and have another look at those birds."

Smoke told him with conviction, "It would be a waste of time. You wouldn't find a thing wrong. I've been doing a lot of hard thinking since witnessing what I did at that ranch today, sheriff, and doggoned if I don't believe I've hit upon the solution of the mystery—or at least a clue to it." The others showed immediate interest. He went on, "Maybe the birds themselves are the messages. Maybe the flights of the whites mean one thing, the flights of the colored ones something else."

The sheriff whacked muscular thighs and exclaimed, "By George, maybe that is it! I hadn't thought of that."

"Umph! I had, and was just going to suggest it," pompously announced Judge Alberts.

"Like hell you were," Luke told him. "Them feathered critters ain't got diamonds, hearts, clubs or spades on 'em—so how could you know anything about 'em?" The judge glared at him again, then he rubbed his bulbous nose humorously.

Gunsmoke McGonigle muttered something under his breath and came suddenly out of his chair, his gaze upon a nearby window. John Clants asked quickly, "What's the matter, cowboy?"

"Sulie Prather just came out of the general store, and a coupla fellas who'd stopped in front of the place are staring at her. One of 'em looks sort of pickled. I'll go up there and—no, it won't be necessary. They've turned and are moseying away."

The other men joined him at the window. The sheriff said acridly, "You should have recognized the pickled one, Smoke. That's Tesro, the big blabber-mouth you tangled with the first day you arrived here."

"Yeah, and so it is!" McGonigle observed softly. "Now I wonder what they said to her, if anything."

"We'll find out right soon, maybe," spoke Kaley. "Looks like she's comin' here."

Sulie Prather had deposited some packages in the buckboard. Her mother had not emerged from the store. The girl was now walking briskly along the street. Tesro and the other tough had stopped and were watching her. Two doors from the sheriff's office she turned into a dress shop. Evidently she went right on through the building, for the next moment she entered Clants' office by the rear door. The two toughs moved on.

"What happened up there?" Smoke asked quickly. "Did those two skunks—"

"No, they didn't say a word to me, but I heard something I thought the sheriff should know at once. I came out of the store suddenly, and heard Tesro say, 'I reckon we'll ride again tonight, since that colored flock come over today. Brandon and Cord are talking it over—' And then the other waddy noticed me, and I heard him warn in a low voice, 'Shut up, you damned fool! The Prather girl!' They stared at me for a moment, but I tried to look innocent, as if I hadn't heard a thing, then they turned and walked on.

"They watched me when I headed this way, though. I guess they were afraid I was coming here. That's why I went through the dress shop and entered this place by the back door."

"You see, sheriff?" Smoke said excitedly. "It's just like I told you! The birds are used as signals back and forth!" He wheeled then and said to Sulie, "You run along. I'll tell you all about it later. Just stay inside the general store until my pard and I join you."

She left the same way that she had entered. The four men quickly formulated a plan. "That gang has got something on for tonight," Smoke declared. "Luke and I want to guard the Prathers during their trip home. But when we're through trailing them to the Cloverleaf 3, we'll then go keep an eye on the Hammer ranch. You two fellas watch Brandon and his gunnies. Okay?"

"Good!" the sheriff agreed grimly. "It's a cinch they've got some crooked business on with Pike Quincey, and this time we want to catch them red-handed."

They talked for a moment longer, and then Luke and McGonigle slipped out. The judge followed a short time later.

LUKE KALEY rode back home in the buckboard with Mrs. Prather. Consuelo and Gunsmoke McGonigle rode the two saddle horses. It was Sulie's idea. She was curious to know what it was Smoke had to tell her.

"Oh, Terry," she said when he had finished explaining, "you must be awfully careful! You know the Hammers would like to murder you!"

It sounded like the little Sulie Prather he had known ten years before. The Sulie who had kissed him that tragic night beside the grave of publisher McGonigle. He looked at her quickly, and this time he saw no cold aloofness on the pretty face. Her eyes met his in a look that made his heart turn a flip-flop and his blood start racing wildly.

Then he told himself that he was presuming too much; that she could not have fallen in love with him practically on the spur of the moment. No, her interest was just the same as that which she would have had for any other puncher who worked for her, and under the same circumstances. Doubtless she would have said the same thing to Luke Kaley, had she been with Luke, instead of Gunsmoke McGonigle.

"We'll be careful," he said.

She had gone into town dressed in Stetson, silk blouse, riding breeches and boots. Now she studied him from under a side of the hat as they rode along, studied his face the while he looked straight ahead. It was hard,

that deeply tanned face, but there was stamped upon it character, forcefulness, and unflinching courage. He kept the firm chin well up, and sat his saddle in a way to command attention.

"Terry," she spoke softly after a while, "I've wondered a lot about you —wondered just what you had become during the years that you were away. Just what is this fellow Gunsmoke McGonigle? Suppose you tell me all about yourself?"

He gave her another intent look, and again there was a sweet gentleness about her that made his pulse race. Then he told her about his life in Mexico.

When he had finished she said quietly, "You're a great man, Terry McGonigle, greater than you perhaps know. Most men in your boots would have come back here and killed the Hammers forthwith, but that would have been wrong. You loaned your marvelous gun skill and your shrewd experience to the sheriff, to get that whole gang in a lawful way. That was right."

He said nothing. She changed the subject, then.

Upon arrival at the ranch the two women immediately fixed something to eat. Old Luke Kaley told them, "Well, ladies, this will be one night you won't need to worry none about this place bein' maybe raided. The whole gang of 'em will be off on some crooked business down on the Rio."

"That's right," agreed Smoke. "Besides, we'll be watching them, will keep ourselves between them and this place all the time, so that even should any of them decide to come here we would arrive ahead of them. The sheriff will be watching those now in town."

Heavily armed, the partners headed for the Fork H ranch. When they came within sight of the place they saw little signs of activity. As the day closed they worked their way closer and closer, until at last they were within two hundred yards of the main building. Their horses well concealed there, they got down and hunkered.

For an hour they waited and watched without noting anything of particular interest. And then the light in the main house went out. A blurred shadow appeared from the building and headed toward the corrals.

Sledge Hammer's heavy voice came to them: "All right, boys, let's get going."

Then the dull light within the bunkhouse flicked out. Men trooped from the long, narrow building and trailed toward the horse corral.

Gunsmoke McGonigle took in a whistling breath between hard lips and said eagerly, "Well, podner, soon we'll know the answer to all our questions?"

Old Luke turned his head aside, uttered a *"Sputchoo!"* as he evicted tobacco juice from pursed lips. Then he grunted calmly, "Uh-huh."

Soon a party of six men was riding away into the gloom, and every man was leading an extra horse.

"Now what the heck does that mean?" wondered Smoke.

"We shall see what we shall see," Luke returned quietly. But his thin, leathery face held a shrewd smile, as if he had witnessed this kind of thing before—in his ranger days.

CAREFULLY the two waddies shadowed. They traveled parallel with the gang, keeping themselves constantly between those night riders and the Prather home. The Fork H men seemed in no hurry. They rode at a trot, sometimes even at a walk.

They passed off Fork H range and over onto that of the Cloverleaf 3. "Say, I don't like this," muttered Gunsmoke McGonigle. "What're they doing on Sulie's spread? Maybe we shouldn't have left the women there alone, after all. But I was so sure the crooked business was in connection with the other side—on account of those pigeons."

"Don't get excited, cowboy. You're right, Quincey wouldn't have sent over a flock of birds just to tell the Hammers that they should make war against two women. And if the gang is bound for the Prather place, how come all the extra hosses?"

"Still, I'd like to know what they're doing over here on Cloverleaf 3 range," Smoke mumbled.

The range of the Prathers reached right down to the Rio Grande, as did that of the Hammers. The band of men whom the two cowboys were shadowing moved deeper and deeper into the very roughest part of the Cloverleaf 3 spread. Ominous shadows they were as they moved leisurely through the gloom. They seemed to be floating through the purple night—devil-ghosts. The somber atmosphere was charged with mystery, and threat.

The six gunmen rode down into a rocky basin, and there they halted. Gunsmoke McGonigle and Luke stopped, too. They dismounted, dragged rifles from scabbards, and slunk swiftly closer. They were eager to see what was going on down there.

To their surprise they found the gang sitting in a loose group. Cigarette coals glowed in the night, and a murmuring of conversation drifted up to the partners. Evidently those men felt pretty safe there on Cloverleaf 3 range.

"Looks like they're waitin' for somebody," whispered Luke.

"Yeah, the rest of the outfit, most likely. The ones in town, I mean."

"Uh-huh, maybe we better move back to the rim until they get here. If we don't they might come up behind us and we'd find ourselves trapped."

"Yes, let's go back. We can see the surroundings better from up there. Fact, we can't see any of it except the rims from down here."

They cautiously returned to their horses, and hunkered on the rim, with a dark thicket at their backs. For half an hour they sat there waiting, watching. Still nothing happened. The moon peeped, and filled the depression with ghostly light, showing the bunched horses, and the group of men still sitting patiently. A quarter of a mile to the west a sparkling streak of silver marked the course of the Rio Grande. All was very quiet and motionless.

Suddenly Gunsmoke McGonigle seized his partner's rail-like arm and pointed to northward. A band of riders had emerged from the night. They streamed over the rim and down into the rugged bowl. "Now we shall see!" whispered Luke. "They had extra hosses, too, you noticed."

The men on the ground got up quickly. One of their number called out boldly, and a reply came back. "I reckon they felt purty safe in throwin' that challenge, since they ain't done nothin' yet," observed old Luke Kaley. "A posse would've had nothin' on 'em."

The two bands soon mingled into one. The men stood around talking for a while, and then there were signs of activity. They swarmed all about the place, some moving methodically back and forth between the horses, and what appeared to be the mouth of a cave.

"They're loadin' something," whispered Luke. "Shall we go closer and try to find out what it is?"

Gunsmoke McGonigle did not answer, for at that instant came a low, harsh voice which froze both him and his partner: "Don't move, or we'll shoot you to rags!"

They were hunkered with arms folded, and they dared not move their hands as they heard footsteps behind them. The next moment their rifles were slid from their laps and their six-guns were whisked away.

The same harsh voice ordered, "Now get up and turn around, with hands lifted."

They followed instructions. He and Luke peered intently at four men who had slipped out of the brush behind them. The next instant the man with

the harsh voice said flatly: "Hell, boys, that's McGonigle and his partner, Kaley. Give them back their irons, Henry, then we'll hurry on with our business." He came closer and they saw now that he was one of John Clants' deputies.

"When we saw you hunkered there we thought you might be guards for that outfit below. We're throwing a gun ring around them. You two fellows can stay here. I'll finish distributing my squad along the rim. At the right time the sheriff will holler a command for the gang to surrender. If they show fight, let 'em have it. A moment later he and his companions had faded into the night.

Fifteen minutes of tense waiting, while the activity went on below, and then the heavy voice of John Clants boomed out with startling suddenness: "In the bowl there! A posse has you covered! Come out—one man at a time—hands high and unarmed! If any of you start shooting—"

At first every outlaw had been stunned at sound of that familiar voice, but now there was wild commotion. Men were scurrying, grabbing bridle reins, vaulting into saddles, cursing, shouting. And then all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER XII

Satan's Gun Spread

IT was trapped buscaderos who commenced that dreadful battle. Hoping to shoot their way clear, they began blasting away, despite the sheriff's command for them to surrender and the accompanying threat. Immediately then, the possemen cut loose, and the desperadoes found themselves ringed with gunfire. McGonigle sprang to his feet and started down the slope.

Luke Kaley lurched up and yelled at him: "Hey, you locoed maverick! Where you think you're going?"

"To get the Hammers before somebody beats me to it. I told you they were mine. I want the satisfaction of taking them personally."

"But hell, feller, you're going into a death trap. If the enemy don't get you your friends up here will. They won't know you from— Aw-h-h-h!" he broke off angrily, and went long-legging after the berserk ranny.

Smoke stumbled and fell sprawling. The next instant Luke was sitting on him. "This here hurts me worse than it does you, feller," he said. "But I ain't going to let no pard of mine commit suicide if I can help it."

Evidently they had been seen there on the slope, for now bullets began kicking up gravelly dirt around them. Smoke squirmed. "Hey, you old fool, get off me! Do you want us to get riddled up here like two lizards stretched out to sun?"

"Willin' to use hoss sense—take cover and fight along with the rest of the posse's gun ring?"

"Well, maybe a little ahead of it. Come on, h'ist yourself. Let's get into this fight." The first wild surge of battle madness past, he now realized the wisdom of his partner's advice, realized how foolhardy was the thing he had been about to do.

A bullet splashed dirt in his face. Another whistled past Luke Kaley's head. The old ex-ranger swore, scrambled to his feet, collared his young friend erect, and shoved him behind a lump of broken rock that lay on the gentle slope. Hunkered there side by side, they began plugging away at the scurrying forms down in the basin.

It would have been a moment of nerve-jangling horror for a person wholly unaccustomed to battle. Six-guns popped and rifles crackled. Bullets snapped like firecrackers, thudded or spatted as they struck. Those which glanced screamed like fiends gone mad. Muzzle flame streaked and

splashed and bloomed in the darkness. Horses neighed wildly; some squealed when struck by lead. Stones clashed under their pounding shoes.

Mingled with all the other infernal sounds were the excited voices of men. The trapped ones were cursing luridly, shouting to one another, some crying out when hit. Many of those death yells were like the cries of wounded animals. And all the time the gun ring was closing slowly, surely.

Gunsmoke McGonigle and his pard quit the shelter of the big lump of rock, separated, and began working their way down the slope. They ducked from cover to cover, kept up their fire. The old ex-ranger was as calm as if he were merely engaged in some ranch duty. McGonigle's lips were drawn back in what was half a snarl, half a wicked smile. His keen eyes kept darting glances about, searching among the rushing forms for two that might be Sledge and Cord Hammer.

Suddenly two of the riders who were trying to shoot their way out of the trap, broke from an arroyo and came tearing up the gentle slope in their direction. McGonigle and Luke were in the clear at that moment. The horsemen shot at them, but riding hard as they were they missed.

The moonlight showed the faces of the horsemen clearly now. The partners saw that their immediate opponents were the loose-mouthed Tesro and Duke Brandon, owner of the Crazy Horse Saloon. Those two renegades were throwing down with their six-guns for another try at shooting a gap in the death ring, but they had chosen the wrong spot for that attempt. Their opponents beat them to the trigger pull.

Luke's bullet struck Tesro in the face. The heavy body lurched backward in the saddle, rolled over the cantle, slid down the inclined rump of the horse. His big spurs twinkled in the moonlight as he did a complete somersault. He struck on his belly, boots down-slope. He slid for a little way in the loose dirt and gravel, hands and face buried. Then he stopped and lay still, a dead man.

McGonigle's death pellet had bored entirely through Duke Brandon's body. That slim, immaculate form stiffened. His gun swung downward, but he held onto it. His face was an awful sight under the ghostly illumination shed by the moon. It was rigid, strained, agonized and surprised. The eyes were popped wide, and they stared glassily ahead. The mouth was open, and dark streams suddenly gushed from its corners. Sitting stiffly like that he rode straight past McGonigle, so close that his right stirrup almost brushed the waddy.

Smoke raised his rifle to fire again. But he didn't have the heart, since Brandon was unable to bring up that dangling right arm. Suddenly the downward pointing six-shooter fell to the dirt. Brandon's mount, rabbit-hopping up the slope, caused him to be unseated. The pony turned to avoid a tiny cedar. Brandon pitched off sidewise, struck on one ear. There was a soft crunching sound and his slim neck suddenly had a grotesque angle in it. The next instant the body was tumbling like a sack of loose rags. The two riderless horses plunged on and disappeared over the rim.

SMOKE and Luke went on, slipping, muttering, shooting, as their high heels dug into the loose earth. Old Luke spat tobacco juice and swore when a bullet cut a hole in his flapping vest.

And now the gun ring had closed in to the floor of the depression. Some of the outlaws were beginning to yell that they would surrender. Others were still cursing madly and fighting, some on horseback, some holed up among boulders and bushes.

Gunsmoke McGonigle recognized the hoarse voice of Sledge Hammer as one of those which was profaning the night. Once more gun madness swept through him. Wheeling away

from his pard, he went running toward the spot from which those bellowed oaths were coming. He crossed a tiny arroyo, tore through a thicket of greasewood—then stopped short. Ten yards away was Sledge Hammer, pinned to the ground by a dead horse. The burly ranchman was striving desperately to free himself.

Gunsmoke McGonigle experienced a letdown. Here was anti-climax. He stood there wondering swiftly what to do about it. And then with a start he saw that Sledge had got free and was scrambling erect.

The big man turned and saw the wiry young cowboy standing looking at him, rifle in hand. The fellow jerked as if from a slap in the face. For just an instant the two looked at each other without saying a word or moving a muscle. Then Sledge Hammer swore heavily and sent a hairy hand diving for the Colt at his thick right leg—the Colt that had slain Mort McGonigle.

With his Winchester at his hip Smoke waited until he saw the pistol rising. Then his steel-spring right thumb simply flipped the hammer of his weapon. The forefinger was holding back the trigger, but a cold shock went through him when he heard only a dull click. In the fever of battle he had not kept count of his shots. The magazine of the rifle was empty!

Sledge Hammer's gun was pointed straight at the waddy's heart now, but he did not fire. He had heard that metallic click, too, and he came slowly forward, a grin on his usually scowling face.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue, McGonigle," he said. "You're going to be my shield until I get out of this place."

Smoke knew that if this scheme worked, the brutal ranchman would kill him as soon as the fellow was in the clear. Moreover, the thought of aiding Sledge Hammer to escape, even under gunforce, was acid to his soul. He told himself hotly that he would die first.

"Put up your hands," Sledge told him.

Gunsmoke McGonigle dropped the empty rifle, but his hands did not go up. Instead they flicked to the pair of Colts at his slim hips. That fast draw was practically invisible there in the moonlight. Perhaps it was only the pantherish swerve of his body aside that caused Sledge to press trigger.

The pistol belched flame. Smoke felt a tearing pain under his left arm. The very short Colt in the cutaway holster—the Colt with no trigger and no sight, the Colt which was a product of his study and practice in gun science—beat his left one out of leather. As it popped there was a thud and the front of Hammer's shirt twitched sharply. The bull of a ranchman fired again, but he was stumbling backward from the impact of that blow in the chest. And his slug missed the waddy's right cheek by an inch.

Now with his lips twisted grimly, Gunsmoke McGonigle fired what was for him a deliberate shot—and it was from the old frontier model Colt that once had belonged to Mort McGonigle. A black dot flicked into existence on Sledge Hammer's broad crag of a brow. A whispered, sobbing sound came from his open mouth, and the burly form just seemed to melt down into a heap.

McGonigle looked at the smoking gun in his own left hand and said huskily: "That settles the score for you, Uncle Mort. Now I've got one to settle for myself."

Again he flung glances about. Men were swarming everywhere, but they were possemen. These outlaws who were on their feet had their hands in the air. The firing had abruptly ceased, except for an occasional outburst of it where some cornered renegade refused to surrender. Dead and wounded men were scattered about the battle scene. There was a babbling of voices, as possemen roughly handled captives.

GUNSMOKE McGONIGLE found Sheriff John Clants. "I got Sledge Hammer," he clipped out, "but how about Cord? I'd like to settle with that jasper personal—"

"Several shot their way through. Maybe he was one of 'em. Leastwise I haven't seen him among the captives or the fallen." McGonigle's jaws clamped hard and he swore under his breath. The sheriff added: "The boys are mopping up. We'll soon know whether we got him or not. I don't know about Duke Brandon, either. He was with the band we trailed out of town, but—"

"I finished B r a n d o n," snapped Smoke. Then he hurried away and began searching among the dead, the wounded, and the captives for Cord Hammer, but he did not find that hated enemy of his. He thought swiftly. Where had Cord Hammer gone, in case the fellow had escaped the trap? Not to the Fork H ranch, for possemen were certain to hurry there in search of him. Perhaps not to Pike Quincey's dive on the other side, either, since people would suspect that he had fled there. Where, then?

He ran into Luke Kaley and Judge Hugh J. Alberts, who had joined company.

"Look," said the old ex-ranger, and he pointed to some brand-new rifles that were scattered about, others packed on a horse which he had captured. "They aimed to run the guns across tonight. The foxy Hammers knowed their own ranch was under suspicion by all honest folks, and might be searched at any time, so they hid the guns over here on the Prathers' spread.

"Nobody would ever suspect Sulie and her mother of smuggling. And if by chance the rifles *were* discovered, nobody could prove that the Hammer-Brandon crowd put 'em there." He jabbed a thumb toward a bound captive who lay a short distance away. "Yeah, that feller over there told us about it."

Judge Alberts rubbed his bulbous nose and said: "The evils of this world are incomprehensible. Tsk! Tsk! Tsk! Now when I was on a judge's bench down in—"

"The only bench you ever set on," Luke cut in acridly, "was alongside a card table."

Gunsmoke McGonigle paid no attention to their exchange of banter. He had wheeled away from them and was striding swiftly to the bound captive. He dropped onto one knee and said: "Listen, fella, you've confessed part—because you figured it was now all as plain as day to us anyway, maybe. But if you'll tell me where I might catch up with Cord Hammer I'll ask the sheriff to make it as easy as he can on you."

The captive licked his lips, hesitated. "Come on!" Smoke urged fiercely, and shook him. "The Hammers wouldn't shield *you*. Old Sledge is dead and the whole gang busted to hell anyway. Cord Hammer never poked his head through a noose to help you or anybody else at any time, did he? No, I'll bet he didn't! Then why don't you maybe help yourself a little right now, by telling me where I might find Cord? I can see you've an idea where he went."

The captive said slowly: "Well, I wouldn't say this, only, tough as I've been, I'd never make war on women. If I can help to save these two—"

McGonigle stiffened; then he thrust his face close to that of the outlaw. "Do you mean that he has gone to the Prather ranch?"

The fellow cringed before the tigerish ferocity of the lean visage above his own. "Very likely—case he shot his way clear. When hell busted loose he yelped to the gang: 'That girl *did* hear what Tesro said to Jenks about the colored pigeons coming over, and our riding tonight, after all! She tipped the sheriff and the posse trailed us here! Damn her, if I get out of this trap I'll—' The heavy gunfire drowned the rest of his words."

Smoke McGonigle's wiry form jerked erect. Uttering a queer, inar-

ticulate cry, he went tearing away into the night. Gone at that instant was all thought of everything except Sulie Prather, her danger—that he must save her. He was a wild man just then.

"Well, what the heck's the matter with that cowboy?" Luke Kaley blurted in surprise.

"Um, I wonder?" echoed Judge Alberts.

"He promised to speak a good word to the sheriff for me if I'd tell him something," called the captive. "And now—how do I know he won't be killed if he tangles with Cord Hammer?"

"Eh, what's that?" asked the judge, and he went quickly to the bound man. Luke followed. The outlaw repeated what he told Gunsmoke McGonigle.

Judge Alberts' usual "political" manner fell away from him like a discarded cloak. His voice rapped sharply as he said: "We must follow him quickly, Luke! As this bird says, Hammer might kill McGonigle. Then what would happen to those women, and their ranch buildings?"

Old Luke spun on high heels, bawled to the sheriff the information which he and Alberts had just got from the captive at their feet. John Clants began shouting crisp, clear-cut orders. Some of the men remained at the scene of battle; others went rushing for horses. But by this time Gunsmoke McGonigle was well away, and riding like mad.

CHAPTER XIII

Bait for the Hang Tree

THE breeze whistled about McGonigle's ears, and turned back the front of his hat brim. His face was like one chiseled from brown marble. Silently he was praying that he would not be too late. There was no telling just what Cord Hammer meant to do. But despite the emotions that stormed within him, the waddy gave close attention to his riding. He kept a firm, sure hand on the reins. It was dangerous business, tearing along at such a clip by night in that wild country.

He passed the spring where he had first met Judge Hugh J. Alberts. The place was dark and lonely now. He thundered on and came to a hillcrest from which he could see smudges that were the Fork H ranch buildings, far away. There was but a single gleam of light at the place. He cursed the ranch and roweled his horse anew. The animal was breathing heavily by this time, but McGonigle, lover of horses though he was, could show the poor creature no mercy. There was too much at stake—the whole world, as far as he was concerned.

On and on he rode, weaving through the breaks, taking all kinds of chances. Rocks clashed sharply beneath the steel shoes of his mount. He breathed a sigh of momentary relief when finally he came out into level country. A few minutes later he broke from a forest of scattered mesquite and saw a steady glow of lamplight ahead—the Cloverleaf 3 ranch. And still he had seen nothing of Cord Hammer! Had he passed the mad wolf somewhere in the breaks? Had he beaten the fellow there? He could only hope so, and ride on.

His mount was blowing like a bellows. The corrals loomed out of the darkness—a lacework of shadow. He streaked past them, and had his first clear view of the forepart of the main dwelling. He uttered a groan when he saw a saddled horse standing at the gate, saw that the front door was wide open. Cord had got there ahead of him!

McGonigle knew that the side of the paling fence before him was very weak. He had been intending to mend it soon. Now he was glad of that weakness. He drove his mount straight at it, crashed through, sent panels scattering like kindling wood.

As he flashed by a corner of the house he made a flying dismount. It carried him bounding to the door. He went over the threshold, a six-gun in each fist. As he did so he heard a sharp command: "Drop those guns!"

In one flashing glance he saw Cord Hammer shielding himself with Sulie Prather, whom the fellow was holding pressed closely to him. She was not struggling. Her bosom was rising and falling swiftly. Her face was ghostly white, her eyes startlingly dark in comparison. Mrs. Prather lay unconscious on the floor.

"You dirty dog!" Smoke ground out.

Cord's voice came again, like the yapping of a coyote: "Drop them quick! Or I'll kill you!"

Gunsmoke McGonigle saw nothing to do but obey. He couldn't fight, not with Cord holding Sulie as a shield. With a sickening sense of failure in his heart he dropped his guns to the floor.

CORD HAMMER had escaped the gun trap back in the breaks, wholly unscathed. All during his hard ride to the Cloverleaf 3 he had been cursing within his black heart, and planning fiendish things. But as he had approached the ranch his usual calm, devilish cunning had taken the place of wild rage. He must be careful, lest he run into a hail of lead.

His hard eyes noted that there was no light within the bunkhouse. He went on toward the main building, his horse moving at a walk now, and he kept shooting glances about—as wary as a lobo. At the front gate he drew rein, sat his saddle for a moment, listening, peering. Then he slid to the ground and went tiptoeing down the walk.

The window shades were only partly drawn. He slunk to a window and looked in, saw Consuelo Prather and her mother in the parlor alone. Fierce hatred rushed like a storm through him as he looked at the girl. She had made a fool of him, then betrayed him and the rest of the gang to the law. Well, she would suffer—plenty.

He catfooted to the front door, suddenly threw it wide and stepped into the house. The two women gasped and started up out of their chairs. Sulie flung a hand to her lips and stared at him in horror. Mrs. Prather trembled from head to foot and put a hand onto the table to brace herself.

"What are you doing here?" Sulie choked out.

His lips curled in a sneering smile. The scar on his left cheek throbbed alternately red and pale. "You ought to know," he said in a voice that fairly dripped with threat. "I escaped the little death trap tonight. I thought I'd pay you *friends* of mine a visit before hitting the long trail. And by the way, it might interest you to know that I won't just have to give up the Fork H. It'll be handled for my benefit by others. Neat arrangement, huh?"

He chuckled mirthlessly. For a moment he stared at them, his hard blue eyes those of a triumphant devil enjoying watching victims suffer torture. Then in a grinding voice he deliberately began telling them what he meant to do.

"There won't be a building left," he rasped.

When he had finished, Mrs. Prather expelled a long deep sigh, closed her eyes and sank to the floor.

As Sulie rushed to her mother she looked aside at the grim-faced torturer and sobbed out: "You brute! You mad wolf!" She knelt beside her mother, felt for a pulse, said huskily, "Thank heaven, she only fainted!"

Cord Hammer had jerked up his head, was listening like a keen-eared beast. Sulie listened, too. From out the night came a sound of hoofbeats, drawing steadily nearer.

His right hand on his six-shooter, crouched, a fierce, killer look on his face, Cord Hammer began backing slowly toward a dark room. Then on second thought he went quickly to a window, peeped.

"Don't move," he told Sulie, and waved his now drawn pistol toward her. "I'm watching you from a corner of my eye." The next moment his mouth curled upward in a satanic grin. "My hunch was right, it's your boy friend."

Ignoring his threat, she straightened quickly and flew toward the shotgun, racked over an inner doorway. She got it down, all right, but he was upon her before she could swing around with it. Cursing savagely, he twisted it from her grasp and tossed it into the next room. At that instant the yard fence crashed.

As Hammer swung the girl around for a shield he said fiercely in her ear, "I'll kill him if you scream a warning or struggle!" She had no idea what he meant to do if she didn't do these things, but there was no time to decide. At that instant Gunsmoke McGonigle came catapulting through the open door.

FOR just a moment the tableau held —Mrs. Prather unconscious on the floor, Cord Hammer pressing Sulie to him, a gun jutting past her right side. The cold-eyed devil and McGonigle stared at each other with infinite hatred. And then again Cord's mouth turned up at the corners, causing the ugly scar on his cheek to wrinkle.

He inquired, an insidious purr in his voice, "Well, what do you think of the situation, Mr. Gunsmoke McGonigle?"

"I think that you're a yellow skunk for hiding behind a girl. Why did you come here, anyway?" McGonigle was stalling for all possible time, knowing that some of the possemen would arrive soon.

Cord Hammer showed his teeth. "To burn every damned building on this ranch, for one thing."

Gunsmoke McGonigle's ears were strained, but they could catch no sound of hoofbeats. He knew this scene could not endure much longer, so he said: "You've always paraded around as a ring-tailed tooter, Cord Hammer—bragged that you'd like to shoot it out with me man to man. Well, now's your chance. Let me pick up my guns—or at least one of them. You put the girl away from you then, and we'll start smoking."

Sulie Prather's lips trembled and her eyes were full of concern for McGonigle, yet she offered no remonstrance against the suggestion. She realized that as the matter stood now, Cord probably figured on murdering the cowboy in cold blood, without giving him a chance to fight back. The other way, Terry might win, since he was said to be a flash with his guns.

Hammer swung his head slowly. There was a faint sneer on his lips.

McGonigle tried again to goad him into the match. "Yellow, huh? A coward! I always knew so, you big bluffer! You're afraid I'd take you, just as I did ten years ago. The night I put that ugly scar on your cheek. Remember?"

The sneering smile on Hammer's lips widened. Again he wagged his Stetsoned head negatively. "You can't work anything like that on me, McGonigle. I'm too smart for you. Your game is easy to see."

Then the mouth pulled down at the corners and the eyes became half hooded. "I'm not afraid of you and you know it. So does everybody else. For years I nursed the burning hope that some day I'd meet up with you and we'd shoot it out. You bullet-marked me once, and I wanted to wipe out the humiliation of it, to show people I was a better man than you.

"I've been rearing to take you on ever since I found out that Smoky Davis was in reality Terry McGonigle, but Dad held me in check. Said that there was no use taking a man-to-man with you—or that at least I should wait until I'd have a mighty good excuse for such a gunfight. The law has just been itching to get something on us, anyway."

Cord Hammer took a deep breath. His lips pulled away from his teeth, but it was not a smile, not even a

mirthless one. "Tonight I came to see things differently. It wouldn't be smart of me to gunfight you, and I've always been considered a smart man, McGonigle. They say you're lightning with your guns, and I might be killed. In that case I couldn't carry out what I came to this ranch to do. And that means a lot to me, McGonigle—almost as much as killing you.

"Even if I did kill you in a stand-up gunfight, I might be so wounded that the law would get me, and then it would be a hang rope for me. No, McGonigle, it wouldn't be smart of me to shoot it out with you, not smart at all. I don't need to think of humiliation or pride any longer, since I'm going to leave this country anyway."

"And what about the girl? What do you aim to do with her?" asked McGonigle.

ONCE more Hammer grinned. "Take her along with me until I'm safe across the river. I might run into possemen, and they'd hold their fire if I used her as a shield for myself. I'll turn her loose—eventually—and she can come back to her burnt up ranch.

"I guess you're wondering why I didn't hide in that dark room and drill you as you came through the front door. Well, I figured that would be giving you too easy an out. I wanted to make you squirm, to see the torture on your face as I talked. You know—the cat and the mouse? But now—I'd better get about my business."

Up until now Sulie Prather had neither spoken nor moved. She had feared that if she did either it would bring on an immediate crisis. And she had given McGonigle every chance to

outwit Cord Hammer. But now she began pleading in a half-sobbing voice: "Don't shoot him, Cord! Please don't! I'll go with you willingly, do anything you say, if only—"

The heavy boom of his gun drowned her further speech. Gunsmoke McGonigle rocked back on his boot heels. A slug aimed for his heart had struck him in the left shoulder. A killer light leaping into the hard blue eyes, a tightening of the face muscles and lips, and sheer instinct had warned McGonigle that Hammer was pressing trigger.

With the pantherish quickness characteristic of McGonigle in moments of crisis, he had jerked his body to the right. The next instant he was diving for the guns which lay on the floor. As he did so he was vaguely conscious that hoofbeats were sounding faintly in the distance, that Mrs. Prather had moaned and stirred.

Hammer tried again to kill Gunsmoke McGonigle, but Sulie was screaming and struggling now. His bullet ripped into the floor. He was a powerful man, and he crushed the slender girl against his big body so hard that she could scarcely move. Again the murderous Colt swung down.

By this time McGonigle had snatched up one of his own guns—the short one which had neither trigger nor sight. He flirted over as gun thunder shook the room a third time. This bullet, too, went into the floor, but it scorched his belly as it did so.

The cowboy dared not shoot at the nearly hidden face or body. Sulie might get in front of the bullet. But Hammer was giving no thought to his lower legs. One of them protruded out at an angle. Smoke fired at it.

There was a smashing of bone. The leg seemed to crumple, just at the boot top. The shock caused Hammer to loosen his hold of Sulie, and she sprang away. Cursing in agony he went down, but he hit the floor still fighting.

He wheeled his Colt toward McGonigle, started to thumb back the hammer. The cowboy fired while scrambling to his feet. Again there was a smashing of bone, and this time it was a wrist which was shattered.

Snarling like a wounded tiger Cord Hammer reached for the gun with his left hand, but McGonigle was springing now. His right boot flicked out, and the gun went skittering. Standing spread-legged beside the fallen man, blood further dyeing the left side of his shirt, Gunsmoke McGonigle said:

"You deserve death a dozen times over, Cord Hammer, but I'm not a murderer. You didn't have a chance after I dropped you with that leg-shot. Yeah, it would have been plain murder. Well, you'll hang anyway, so what's the odds?"

Cord said nothing, just glared at him. The sound of galloping hoofs was quite clear now. Sulie was crying softly, in mingled relief and horror; nevertheless she hurried to her mother, who was just trying to sit up. Swiftly she told Mrs. Prather that the danger was over, and explained what had happened.

Gunsmoke McGonigle suddenly felt very tired, a little sick. Objects within the room were blurred, and they rocked in a circular motion. He stumbled to a chair and dropped into it, then he passed out. The cowboy had lost a good deal of blood from the wounds which he had sustained during the night.

TWO of the captives made complete confessions. They apparently felt no compunctions about so doing, since the gang had been caught red-handed, and completely wiped out. The Hammers and Duke Brandon had been carrying on all kinds of crooked business with the Pike Quincey gang. Cattle rustling, horse stealing, smuggling, border raiding—anything at all to make money.

Wishing to be seen in each other's company as seldom as possible, Quin-

cey and the two Hammers had used pigeons as a method of communication. The white ones meant nothing at all. They were released frequently just to keep people accustomd to seeing pigeons in flight. But the colored ones did mean something. The signal was, "Are you ready?" Or, "Yes, we're ready."

"For instance in this latest case," explained one of the prisoners, "Pike Quincey had arranged to sell some guns to a hard-pressed bandit outfit, and he made a deal with Sledge to supply them. When they were ready for delivery to him the Hammers sent over a flock of the colored pigeons, with some white carriers added to guide.

"Quincey sent back a similar flock, which meant that he savvied and would be ready to receive the guns at a prearranged time and spot. It'll be the last of Quincey too," he broke off. "The Mex government has been trying to land him for some time, for sneaking supplies to bandits and revolutionists."

The man also admitted that it was Sledge Hammer who had killed Smoke McGonigle's father years before, one night when a supposed horse thief had tried to get away with a fine stallion.

Texton was a-buzz concerning the wholesale cleanup. Gunsmoke McGonigle had been taken into town during the night, but he quickly had recovered from the effects of shock and blood loss. He was very much up and about the next day, although he wore a bandage around his body, and his left arm was in a sling.

At mid-morning he stood once more beside his uncle's grave. Unbeknown to him Sulie Prather had come into town. Unbeknown to him she had talked with Luke Kaley and Judge Hugh J. Alberts. At that very moment she was climbing the little knoll to join him.

Gunsmoke McGonigle drew the old frontier model Colt which had belonged to his uncle. He punched the cartridges from it, pocketed them, and then he stooped and placed the pistol carefully against the rock headstone which he himself had erected ten years before.

"There you are, Uncle Mort," he spoke aloud. "You can have it back now, for its work is done. Took guns, not editorial shafts to clean up this tough county. You know the old saying—fire with fire. But henceforth this will be a decent community to live in, I'm thinking. My job here is finished, too. I'm riding on, as soon as I've paid a last visit to the graves of my parents, out at the old place."

The cowboy became aware of another presence, then. He looked back quickly and saw Consuelo Prather. She came quietly to his side and stood there, looking down with him at the grave. She held a big, flowered hat in her hands. The wind played softly with her dark hair and the spring dress she wore.

After a while she turned to him, placed her hands on his shoulders, looked into his eyes and stated with calm frankness: "You're not going away, Terry McGonigle. I won't let you."

Something in her eyes, something in her touch, the near presence of her, caused blood to pound in his veins. "Bu—but, Sulie," he said hoarsely, "there's nothing for me here. I—"

"Oh, yes, there is. This country needs you—the Cleverleaf 3 needs you. I need you."

He just looked at her, long, steadily. Again she was an enigma, but not a cold, aloof one this time—a gently smiling one. Then she said softly: "Do you remember, Terry, what happened here ten years ago? I kissed you—like this." She pulled his head down to her and kissed one of the tanned cheeks.

"Sulie," he said hoarsely, "I love you!"

"I know," she told him quietly. "You have shown me that—almost from the very first day you came to the ranch."

"Why have you been so cold?"

"I didn't know what you might have become during the years of your absence, Terry. You'd taken on a new name. You carried two guns, with which it was said you were lightning. I didn't know but what maybe in your suffering and your bitterness you had turned outlaw. And I had to know that the man I married was right."

This time as he stared at her, his face—so long grim, cold, bitter—became almost beaming. She was smiling again, and her dark eyes were bright and tender.

"Sulie!" he almost shouted, and swept her into his embrace. She clung to him.

After a moment he gently pushed her away. The lean face was troubled again. "But, honey, we can't get married for a few years yet. You've got a ranch, while I'm just a cowboy without—"

"Listen, Terry," she told him seriously, "the Cloverleaf 3 is deeply in debt and in bad shape. I don't know whether or not I could pull it out of the boghole—but you can. That alone would entitle you to share in the spread." She drew closer to him, looked up again into his gray eyes. "Well?"

Again he smiled, again he took her into his embrace. They stood there like that they knew not how long, his cheek pressed to her soft, dark hair. Stood there on the knoll where all the town could see if it cared to. Gone now from the cowboy's breast were all bitter thoughts of the past. He was at peace with the world and supremely happy.

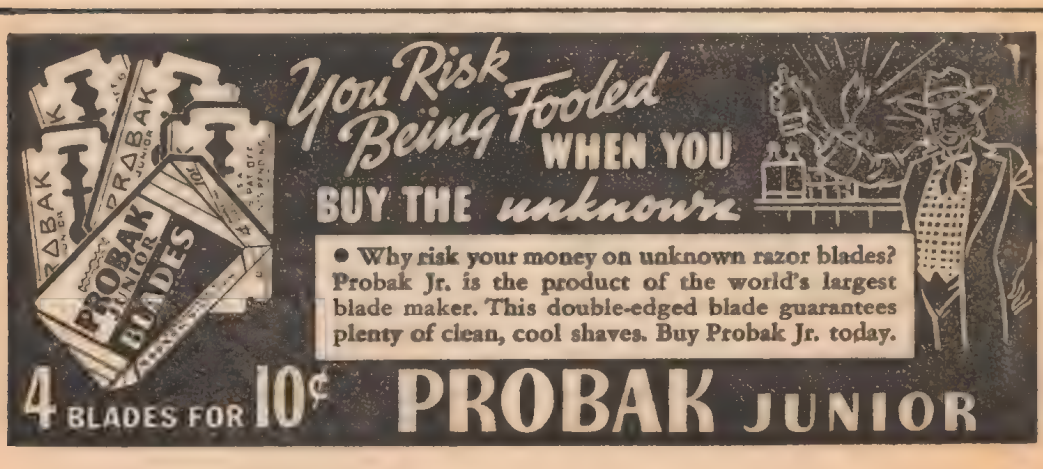
It was a sound of hoofbeats which broke the spell. He and Sulie moved away from each other to find two riders near—Judge Hugh J. Alberts, and Luke Kaley. "We thought we'd come up here for the view," explained the judge, and rising in his stirrups he looked all about him. Luke chuckled.

Gunsmoke McGonigle noted the packed two saddles, and he said quickly, "Hey, what's this?"

The judge explained: "Well, things are so well settled around here, Luke and I decided we'd ride down into the lower Rio country where the political situation will be better for me, and he can go back into the ranger service."

"Yeah," affirmed Luke, "this here country is all right for a married man, but she has become too tame for mavericks like us." He winked at the couple, then they all laughed.

Good-bys were said, and then the two adventurers rode away down the slope. Gunsmoke McGonigle and Sulie Prather back there on the knoll, arms about each other's waists, gazed after them silently.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Hangtree Bait

By
Wilfred McCormick

The kid wrangler of the Bar Four outfit was wearing the killer's brand that belonged to somebody else. And when he tried to play his ace-in-the-hole to cheat the hangtree, he rode hell-bent into a bushwhacker's death trap — a trap that was sprung by an hombre who had claimed to be his amigo.

AS a usual thing, I'm plumb harmless—just a slim, sandy-faced man of seventeen that aims to get along with everybody. But when it begins to look like folks has all lined up for turns at kickin' the seat of my pants, I ain't exactly the kind that would bend over to make the job easy. No, not exactly! In fact, I can sling somethin' of a boot toe myself when occasion seems to call for some of the same.

As a consequence, I'm one day jailed for murder. Only they can't

prove a thing, an' have to let me go again. But I can guess how Ruidoso sentiment is piled up against me, so I take the shortest way out of town, an' the fastest.

It's gettin' well along toward sundown by the time I catch sight of a loaded chuck wagon in the canyon trail ahead. Ridin' up at a high lope, I finds them just startin' to make camp at Muleshoe Spring.

The foreman turns out to be Slim Herron. His wagon crew is a branch of the Box-Four outfit which is here to gather a few hundred head of brush country steers to fill out a trainload shipment. They're just the outfit I'm seekin'.

Bein' a horse wrangler by age, I immediately bump Slim for a job. At first, he just frowns an' shakes his head. Finally he admits he'll be needin' a wrangler an' agrees to put me on. But he gives me to understand that he won't be responsible for any accidents in case I get into trouble with his men.

That makes me laugh. Because, you see, I've been wearin' man-size pants for quite a spell now, an' never yet asked nobody to play nursemaid over me to preserve my hide. An' that's exactly what I tell him. So Slim says it's a bargain.

We all pitched in together to make camp. My job was to rustle wood for old "Dad" Weimer—he's the cook. There was plenty of dead oak an' juniper all about the place, so it wasn't more than half an hour till I've got a pile stacked over beside the chuck wagon that's as high as my head—I'm five-foot-nine, to be exact.

Bein' through, I moseyed over to the campfire. The main gang has all finished by that time too, an' they're squatted around on their heels, mostly smokin'.

An' right from the start, it's easy for me to see that trouble has got its loop set for me.

Not a single one of them tight-mouthed rannies even nods when I try to hand out a few good-natured "howdies." They just set there, sullen-lookin' as a bunch of renegade longhorns that's been cooped up in a high board corral.

But bein' curious as a regular old she-cat by nature, I try to strike up a little palaver. It don't draw a raise from the men. Just a few grunts, about as friendly as a pack of hungry coyotes.

Directly a bull-necked, red-jowled hombre with a pair of shoulders that would make a buffalo jealous, throws a wolfish glare over in my general direction.

"Horse wranglers," he opines from one corner of his mouth, "are a heap like other tinhorns—just because they can walk on their hind legs, an' wear a big hat, they want to call themselves men!"

Well, them words stung. It's about the same as gettin' switched across the face with a cow's tail on a cold winter mornin'. So I don't waste any time at gettin' into action.

One big jump carries me plumb across the campfire. Another one of the same brings me close enough that I can shake my fists down in that surly brute's face.

"If you've got any doubts," says I, "about my bein' big enough to wear man-size pants, there's a powerful easy way to find out. Just get up from your hunkers an' I'll show you!"

BUT he don't move for quite a spell. Just keeps on settin' there, with a sneerin' look on his face that's about as ugly as a wave on a dirty dishpan bucket. But directly he shrugs them big shoulders.

"If you was really man-size," he snarls, "you wouldn't shoot folks in the back. You'd more likely—"

That's as far as he gets. My left hand snakes out like a coiled rattler. I grab the hat off his head. I slap it square in his face—hard. Not once, but two or three times.

That brings him to life in a hurry. With a mad bellow, he barges to his feet like a hurt bull. He dives

straight for me. I step to one side. As he lunges on past, I rap him across his stubble-bearded cheek with my fist. It's only a light blow, thrown from off balance, an' it don't do much harm—just enough to send him whirlin' around an' back at me again, a thousand times madder than ever.

I try another side step. But this time I don't quite make it. My feet get tangled in a loose saddle blanket, an' I stumble. Before I can throw up my hands, he's busted through my guard like a mountain boulder crashes through a flower patch. An' lays me just about as flat!

It's several seconds before I know what's happened. Then I begin to feel conscious of a dozen million stars, all dancin' in front of my bleary eyes, an' my whole head feels like somebody has used it for a floor mat.

Grittin' my teeth, I make a try at gettin' up. But the best I can do is to lean on one elbow, with my chin, saggin' well down toward my brisket. An' there I lay.

From somewhere—it seems like forty miles off—I can hear the foreman's voice:

"Red," he growls, sorta reproachful-like, "you oughtn't to be too rough on the little devil. After all, he's just lost his step-daddy an' hasn't got a friend left to his name. He's just—"

"Lost his step-daddy!" snarls the big fellow. "Yeah, I reckon he has—an' by his own cowardly, back-shootin' gun!"

"The courts turned him loose," mutters the foreman.

"Sure," admits Red. "The courts may have, but the *people* ain't!"

"You mean that—"

"Sure. I mean there'll be a regular lynch party for this murderin' little devil, before he gets a week uglier. You'll see! That's why me an' the other regular hands here object to your puttin' him to work as our horse wrangler. It ain't fair to the good name of the Box-Fours."

Well, when them words rolled off the end of Red's tongue, they caused a hellish stampede inside my brain. But there wasn't a thing I could do about it. When I tried again to get up, my whole body acted like it was paralyzed, an' I couldn't climb a bit higher than my knees, with my temples throbbin' like pitman rods on a high-speed windmill.

Then I begin to notice somethin' else. The foreman is gettin' mad himself! His lips are shut tight together, an' his chin has come a good inch farther out of his bandanna. He looks like he could almost bite the big fellow's head plumb off.

An' when the words finally do come, they're hissed between his gritted teeth, sorta like steam whistlin' out of a coffee pot.

"Red Foster," he says, "if you, or anybody else, don't like the way I'm runnin' the Box-Four, I reckon you know what you can do."

The big fellow lets out a raspin' laugh. "There's other outfits," he opines. "An', besides, you wouldn't turn off your whole crew, just on account of one little murderer."

"That's what you think!" Slim Herron snaps right back at him. "But I'm tellin' you one thing, here an' now. My wagon crew got along first-rate before you ever saw Lincoln County, an' I reckon this past week with you on the payroll ain't improved—"

"Listen, Slim," the big fellow interrupts, "you ain't serious?"

"If you think not, just try me!"

THE two men stare one another straight in the eye. Gradually Red Foster's mouth sags open. He blinks his close-set green eyes two or three times, then swallows. He does manage to produce a laugh, but anybody can see that his nerves are tight as a fiddle string.

"Hell!" he scoffs. "I didn't mean to hurt the little devil."

"That sounds better," growls the foreman. He turns to level his finger at the rest of the men. "I'm remindin' all of you," he goes on, "that it still ain't proved that our horse wrangler

really killed his step-daddy. Until it is, keep your hands off'n him. Understand?"

There wasn't a word said. Out in the dark somewhere, I could hear a coyote howlin'. Two hobbled horses thumps around to better grass. But that campfire gang never once let out a sound, or made a move.

Directly the foreman strides over to me. Reachin' down, he puts a hand under my left armpit. With him to help, I climb up on my two feet, wobblin' an' swayin' like a horse with the trembles. But pretty soon my head begins to clear some, an' I feel a lot better.

The two of us stroll off to one side. We stop under a big spruce tree, me leanin' against the trunk.

"Reckon I'm much obliged to you," I mumble, not knowin' hardly what else to say.

The foreman turns loose a grunt. Then he catches hold of my black sateen shirt sleeve.

"You see how things lay," he growls. "The best thing you can do, is to throw a leg over that dun horse of yours an' put plenty of miles between here an' sunup. Come on! I'll help you get saddled."

He starts out toward the remuda. But I don't make a move to follow, just stand there an' shake my head.

"Reckon I'll stay right here," I declare.

"But—but," he sputters, "you're crazy! Next time, maybe I won't be around when Red Foster tangles fists with you."

"An' next time," says I, "there won't be no saddle blanket around neither. That's what tripped me. Otherwise, I—"

Right there the foreman cuts me short. "You're crazy!" he repeats "Why, Red Foster is a good sixty pounds heavier than you. An' he's tough. An' he's never met a man yet that could stand up to him with his fists. Why, he'll eat you alive!"

"In that case," says I, stubborn as a mule, "the funeral will be my own. But I still ain't scared of that big ox. I tell you, it was a saddle blanket that spoiled things for me tonight."

It's quite a spell before Slim Herron makes any comment, durin' which time he rolls a cigarette an' lights it. An' for some reason—I don't know just why—the notion strikes me that the foreman is actin' strangely nervous about somethin'.

Pretty soon he drops the cigarette an' stomps it under his heel. He lays a hand on my shoulder.

"Kid," he says, "you've got a heap bigger job ahead of you than fightin' Red Foster. You've got your neck to think about. Because, like Red mentioned, folks are sure riled to the boilin' point. They might even give you a dance on air. I reckon you know that?"

"I reckon so."

"What do you aim to do about it? If you're really innocent—"

"Innocent!"

I squawled the word at him so quick, an' so unexpected, that he nearly busts a ham-string jumpin' out of the way. Then I follow up, shovin' my chin almost in his face.

"Why, dang your picture," I goes on, "of course I'm innocent! Didn't I talk myself hoarse in front of that jury, lettin' the whole mule-headed audience know that I wouldn't have laid even a finger on my step-daddy? Wasn't them my very words almost?"

"Yes," admits Slim, "but the evidence was agin you."

"The evidence don't amount to a whoop in hell! Nobody saw me pull the trigger, an' nobody ever heard the two of us in a quarrel."

ABOUT that time, Slim Herron shrugs his shoulders. I can see that he still ain't convinced, but I wait to let him have his say. An' directly it comes:

"They can prove that you lost a hundred dollars in a poker game the night before. They can prove that you promised faithful to dig up the money from somewhere, even if it took murder to do it. They can prove that you

was seen near his body—the first person to reach the spot after it happened. An' they can prove that you was found with his seven hundred an' fifty-three dollars in your pocket—the exact amount he had just gathered from a sale of some yearlin's. An' by the way," inquires Slim, breakin' off rather sudden. "What's happened to all that money?"

"The sheriff's got it."

"I'll wager you never see hide nor hair of it again."

"Yes, I will. He's just keepin' it in trust, till after this whole affair is finally cleared up."

"Why," asks the foreman, "didn't you skip with the money when you had the chance?"

"Because," says I, "that wasn't my idea. You see, when I found Daddy Joe murdered there in the corral, I knowed the sheriff's office ought to be notified right away. But still I didn't want to go off an' leave that much money in his pockets. That was a danged sight too much dough to be left layin' around. So I shoves it inside my shirt front an'—"

"An' right then," interrupts the foreman, "Sheriff Murdock an' two of his deputies happened to ride past. They nabbed you red-handed. You wasn't smart!"

Well, that sort of talk was all old stuff, an' I'd heard it a dozen times every day since the killin'. So my answer to Slim Herron is just plain silence.

But directly he starts pumpin' me again. "If you ain't guilty," he wants to know, "then who is?"

At that one, I have to shake my head. "I'd give a right arm if I only knowed," says I.

"Any clues at all?"

"Yes. A little one."

Right away, Slim gets a heap more interested. "You mentioned that at the trial," he says. "But you didn't tell anybody what it was. Maybe you'd let me in on the secret."

But again I just shake my head, givin' him silence for an answer.

He tries again: "It might be that I could help you. Two pairs of eyes, an' two heads, is better than one. I'll do anything I can for you, kid."

"I'm plumb positive of that," I assure him. "But this clue of mine is so crazy-soundin', that you'd only laugh at it. So I'm keepin' it under cover for a spell yet. But when the time comes, I'll dab a noose on the killer, an' there'll be proof that he can't wiggle out of."

After about fifteen or twenty seconds, Slim nods his head. "All right," he agrees. "You can suit yourself. If you need help, though, just let me know. An' in the meantime, you'd best steer clear of Red Foster. If that big buffalo lays hands on you again, you might never be able to trace down this clue of yours."

An' with that, Slim Herron strolls back to the fire.

Nothin' more happens durin' the evenin', except that we get a regular thoroughbred meal for supper—everything from beans an' cornbread to boiled beef an' coffee. It's a plumb dandy, an' I crawl into my soogans about eight-thirty, full as a grain-foundered horse. As for Red Foster, him an' me keeps out of one another's way. A couple of times I caught him eyein' me on the sly, but he's quick to turn his head when I look over in his direction.

IT'S still dark the next mornin' when somebody shakes me by the shoulder. Directly I'm awake enough to know that it's old Dad Weimer, an' that he's roused me to ride out after the day's remuda.

So I don't waste any time as I climb into my clothes—shiverin' an' shakin' from the before-daylight chill. An' when I start over to the place where my little dun pony has been hobbled, old Dad gives a low whistle that calls me over to him instead. He shoves a cup of steamin' hot coffee in my hand.

"Here, kid!" he growls. "Get this inside your belly, then hustle after them horses."

Well, I've hung my lip over some pretty good chuck in my day, but nothin' ever tasted half so good as that hot coffee. An' when I tried to thank the old fellow, he just lets out a snort like a mad range bull.

"Get after them horses!" he growls.

I do exactly that.

It's about a mile an' a quarter up-canyon to the little meadow where Slim has had the remuda throwed on the night before, an' I don't have any trouble findin' the spot. The horses is all used to bein' drove together, so inside half an hour I've got them rounded up in a herd an' we're lopin' back down towards camp.

The sun has just climbed over the edge of Skyland rim by the time we get in sight of the chuck wagon. I can see that all the cowboys have finished breakfast. They're out to one side, waitin' with a rope corral, an' ready to turn the lead horses inside it.

Still squatted by the campfire are two men. An' as I ride closer, I can see that it's Slim Herron an' Red Foster. The thought flashes through my head that maybe the foreman's givin' Red some more warnin's about leavin' me alone, an' it ain't a pleasant thought. In fact, it makes me about half sore. Hell! Can't a man of seventeen look out for himself?

When my horse herd clatters into the rope corral, I manage to throw another look over toward Red an' the foreman. They're just gettin' to their feet. I see the foreman give Red a slap on the back, an' then both men laugh together, like they're the best friends on earth. Then they hustle out to join the other hands at gettin' mounted for the day's work.

That leaves me a few minutes to spare, an' I proceed to make the best of them—partakin' of a good supply of Dad Weimer's breakfast cookin'. Afterwards, I get ready to drive the remuda off to better grass. But the cook catches hold of my shirt sleeve. Wonderin' what he means, I follow him around to the other side of the wagon. He pulls an old-style .44 revolver from his bedroll an' lays it in my hand.

"Here, kid!" he growls. "If you don't take along somethin' to protect yourself, you'll never live to die of old age."

"Is some devilment afoot?" I want to know.

He shrugs his shoulders. "Can't never tell," he says. "But you're a lad that's got nerve, an' it's a quality I always did crave to see in a youngster."

Well, I'd like to have asked him more, but I can tell that it ain't no use to try. He's already waddled back to his pots an' pans, grumblin' about somethin' or other to himself. So I shove the big old gun inside my belt an' swing astride the dun pony.

Bein' considerable acquainted with that Ruidoso country, I drive the horse remuda back down the canyon for a few hundred yards, an' then push them up Carrizo Creek to the right, where the grass is plenty good an' long. They begin to graze right away. It leaves me with a little time on my hands, so I ride the dun part way up the north slope where there's an old deserted mine shaft. There's several dilapidated shacks about the place, too, an' some old machinery that's long since rusted an' been throwed away.

BUT after prowlin' around the ruins for some fifteen or twenty minutes, a hot mornin' sun begins to work on me. As a consequence, it ain't long till I'm sleepy-headed as a deacon in church. An' since there's only one good cure for an ailment like that, I don't waste much time at givin' it a try.

Pretty soon I've got the dun hobbled so he won't get out of reach, an' I'm sprawled flat on my back in the shade of a big aspen, with my hat pulled over my face to keep the flies away.

I don't know how long I'm asleep, but it's a boot toe that wakes me up in a hurry. With a jump that strains

every muscle in my body, I throw the hat off an' open both eyes. An' what I seen was a-plenty. Red Foster is glarin' down at me. His thick, bloated-lookin' face is flushed like an over-stuffed hog's, an' his piggish eyes is filled with the meanest expression that ever straddled a man's nose.

"What—what do you want?" I manage to sputter.

He rips out a curse. "Horse wrangler," he snarls, "you've got only three minutes."

We stare one another in the eye for a minute. Then I roll myself over, real slow, pretendin' to start to my feet. At the same time, I sneak my right hand down toward the butt of old Dad's six-gun.

But the scheme don't work.

Damnation! That Red Foster has got the fastest draw between hell an' Texas. I could swear that his hand never moved an inch—yet there's his gun poked right in my face!

So I raise my hands about shoulder

high, an' empty. He snatches the hog-leg away from me an' plants it in the front of his belt. Then he jabs me an awful wallop with his own gun. But just then I catch sight of somethin' that sends all my hopes boomin' skyward. Over behind the nearest shack, is a man's head an' shoulders. An' they belong to Foreman Slim Herron!

Which fact immediately changes everything. So I look straight into Red Foster's eyes. With somethin' of a smirk, I say:

"Red, you don't dare pull that trigger. If you do, there's a witness ready to swear it was murder, an' the sheriff will give you the rope. An' I'm here to tell you somethin' more," I

"Three minutes till what?" I ask him, tryin' to force the words as big as I can.

"Three minutes," he says, "to fork yourself on that horse, an' get started for Texas."

Well, when Red turns loose of them words, my heart begins to turn flip-flops like a locoed bronc. But I fight to keep it from showin'.

"An' supposin' I don't?" is the question I offer him.

He shrugs his shoulders. "In that case," he says, "there'll damned soon be one less horse wrangler in the world."

"Meanin' murder?"

"Nothin' else. It's up to you."

goes on, gettin' more cocky every minute. "You're the cur that shot Daddy Joe in the back. I've got a clue that proves it."

When I said that, Red Foster sucks in his breath real quick, an' his eyes begin to shine like lighted beads.

"What is that clue?" he demands. "Either talk, or—" He gives me another jab with the gun.

"My clue," says I, "is two things: One of them is an empty nail keg, an' the other is a block of salt. The killer had stacked one on the other, an' then stood on top of both to peek through a crack in Daddy Joe's granary. I measured the height myself. There's only four men in Lincoln County tall enough to see an' shoot through that crack. Two of them was playin' poker in town at the time. A third one was —" A vicious jab with the gun cuts me short.

"How many folks have you told this to?" he grits.

"Just one," says I. "The sheriff himself. An' that's why I claim you don't dare pull that trigger. If I'm found murdered, he'll know—"

"There's other ways of handlin' the job," interrupts Red, with the ugliest grin that ever smeared a man's face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," says he, "that I'll use my bare fists. I'll dump you an' that buckskin pony both down the old mine shaft. Folks will figure you was guilty an' skipped the country. But if somebody should happen to find your bodies, there won't be anything but a few bruises—showin' that the horse accidentally stumbled through—"

An' right there I stop him.

"Red," says I, with double the cockiness of a bantam rooster an' not half the good sense, "you lack an even thousand pounds of bein' big enough to do the job."

Sayin' that, I motion to Slim Herron who is still watchin' us both.

"Slim," I call to him, "we'll give this big ox an even break. As long as he fights fair, you keep out—no matter what happens to me. There ain't no saddle blankets loose this mornin', an'—"

"Cut out the stallin'!" growls Red.

HE shoves the six-gun back in his holster. Then he spits on his hands. His two fists look like sledge hammers, as he doubles them up an' stalks forward. I back away a step. Then another. Red lets out a snarl, lungin' straight into me. But I skip to one side, an' rap him a light blow. It don't hurt him a bit, an' I know it, but I'm tryin' to get him crazy mad.

Well, it works. When Red whirls again, he roars an' shakes his head. Then he charges for me like a whole herd of buffaloes.

Again I skip to one side. But this time I don't aim at his face. Instead I hook my right fist into his belly. The blow has got steam, too—all I can throw behind it. An' it gets the job done! Red lets out a sickly wheeze. He doubles over, pressin' both hands to his middle. His face is the color of calf's liver. I step over in front of him. Bracin' myself, I uncoil my right arm once more. My doubled fist lands flush on his chin. He topples to the ground like a giant oak.

At the same time, somethin' clubs me a horrible blow from behind. It seems to crack my skull in forty million pieces. I stagger forward. Everything is blurry, an' my knees buckle. I fall down on top of Red. But I ain't quite gone yet, an' manage to roll my eyes around.

Hell! There's Slim Herron poised right above me! Slim has clubbed me with his six-gun barrel, an' is ready to do it again. Then, in a flash, the whole thing dawns on me. This long-legged foreman an' Red Foster has been in cahoots all the time. Slim has just pretended to be friends with me, so they could learn about that missin' clue. It's kept them both worried.

Well, when I first slumped down on Red, I didn't think I'd ever get up again. But when I begin to realize how I've walked right into their trap, it makes me madder than any old she-

bear. So I grit my teeth an' resolve that I won't ever die until they've both been made to pay.

Grinnin' sorta weak, I look up at Slim. "Reckon you've won the race," mumbles I. "Come to remember it now, there was two sets of strange footprints in that granary. I ought to have guessed it sooner."

In the meantime, while I'm sayin' the above, one of my hands is stealthily gropin' around Red Foster's gunbelt.

"Your step-daddy," snarls the foreman, not noticin', "was a fool! His evidence sent my brother—Red an' me are brothers—to the penitentiary twelve years ago. Red swore he'd even things if he ever got out. An' you're the next to—"

"Not me!" I yells.

Both words was squawled at the top of my voice. For an instant, they startle the foreman. An' that instant is enough!

It allows me to yank Red's gun from its holster. I whirl the muzzle around. At the same time, the foreman jerks his trigger. His gun roars like a clap of thunder. But I've wiggled back, an' all the harm his bullet does is tear a hole in my shoulder. Then my own gun belches lead. Slim Herron topples down in a heap.

The next thing I know, gallopin' hoofs is poundin' the side of the mountain. Sheriff Murdock an' old Dad Weimer come rushin' over to me. The cook has lost his hat, an' his checkered shirt tail is strung out behind him like a windmill fan.

Somehow, in spite of my throbbin' shoulder, the sight tickles me. I let out a whoop.

"Come on!" I invite them. "The horse wrangler has throwed a noose, an' you ought to see what's inside it!"

"I know," growls the sheriff. "Two murderers—one of them an escaped convict. Dad, here, has just told me that neither man was on the range the afternoon of the killin'. That busts their alibi wide open. But you didn't have no business tacklin' them both alone."

"An' don't I know it!" says I. "The thing that saved me, comes inside a wrapper named 'luck'!"

At that, old Dad lets out a grunt. "Luck, hell!" he snorts. "Luck is only a yearlin', compared to the full-grown nerve you've got!"

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Mutiny on the Mesa

Novelette of Rangeland Rifles

By Charles M. Martin

CHAPTER I

The Holster High-Sign

OLD FRED CALDWELL grinned while he built a finicky loop in his tight-twist rope and headed the deep-chested mountain horse after a long-legged weaner calf. Every movement of the cattleman was expert and sure from long practice, when the trained roping pony cut through the milling band of she-stuff and followed the bawling calf like a shadow.

Fern Caldwell kicked the fire together and watched her father whirl his loop to snare the dodging calf. The branding iron glowed cherry-red when she grasped the handle with one gloved hand and banked it deeper. Fred Caldwell dragged the calf free of the bunch and slid from the saddle when his horse stopped and set himself against the tightened rope. He worked hand over hand down the

A pistol-smart pilgrim plays both ends against the middle, when he drives two hard-bitten oldsters into a horn-locking showdown.

tight-twist like any waddy until he reached the struggling calf.

The old cattleman reached across the little animal and gripped the two legs on the offside. Then he flanked his calf to the ground and held it down with his knees. His wind-roughened voice boomed the familiar old call of the branding fire while his horse held the rope tight and watched the little scene with range-wise eyes.

"Hot iron!"

Fern Caldwell looked like a forty-a-month cowboy in her blue high-cuffed Levis and heavy wool shirt. Gripping the branding iron in her right hand, she slapped the ashes away on the leg of her chaps. Then she high-heeled to the catch with spur chains jingling like a tophand.

"Hot iron," she echoed, and knelt on the calf while her left hand smoothed the short hair on the left flank.

The odor of burning hair mingled with the tang of the piñon fire, when she pressed the iron down tightly and held it just that fraction of time necessary to make a neat brand without burning the flesh too deep. Then she levered erect and stepped back with the iron swinging from her hand.

"Tie him loose and let him high-tail," she chuckled, and her voice was throaty and rich with the strength of youth.

Old Fred Caldwell threw off his loop and jumped back to allow the calf to scramble to its feet. He watched the bawling animal with a frown on his weathered face while he was walking back to his horse. Then he climbed his saddle and made his coils while his keen blue eyes searched out another unbranded calf. Fern Caldwell ran back to her fire and buried the branding iron deep. Then old Caldwell kneed his horse close while his right hand shook out a loop which he laid up over his shoulder.

"Funny about them leppies, Fern," he muttered. "Calf roundup just last month, and I don't see how come us to miss three of the critters right down here in the creek bottom. Now back up there in the brakes it would have been different."

"You can't tell about a leppy, Dad," the girl answered with a grin. "Not having any mothers to guide them, they just got to running with the wild bunch. Perhaps I had better flank down the next one."

"You blow up yore fire," the old cattleman growled, "I ain't but sixty-one, and I can still rassle my own calves."

Caldwell glowered at the smiling girl and then shifted his eyes to the herd. He touched the roping horse with a blunted spur and pointed toward a white-faced weaner calf while his calloused fingers took a grip below the hondo and spread the loop. Then he was threading his way between the dodging cows with rope singing a high whistling note.

Twenty-year-old Fern Caldwell sat on her spurs and fanned the chip fire with her high-crowned gray Stetson. Although slenderly built, she was strong as a man from long hours in the saddle, with the ruddy glow of perfect health under her velvety tanned skin. She turned her head slightly when a horse splashed through the shallow waters of Blue Water Creek, but old Fred had made his catch and was giving her the high-sign while he hand-over-handed down the tight rope.

"Hot iron, feller, and step about fast. Don't sit there on yore heels a-gawkin'!"

The girl grabbed the glowing iron and dusted it on her worn leather

chaps. Sprinted across the short grass when her father flanked the calf and sat down on the tossing head while his left hand jerked a piggin' string from around his waist. Slipped the loop over one front foot and gathered the two hind legs in the crook of his elbow. Made his wraps and tie before the girl reached him with the red branding iron.

"Three-bone tie," he grunted and sat down again on the bawling calf. "That dang leppy is just short of a yearlin', and I figgered I better wrap him up. Slap it on him, Chip!"

"Coming up," the girl grunted like a man, and kneed the hind-quarters down to press the F Bar C iron on the quivering flank.

PUNGENT smoke curled up to taint the bracing air when the iron took hold and scorched the hide. The girl made her print just so long and raised the iron when she was sure the scab-burn was deep enough. Then she levered to her feet and reached for her left hip pocket after dropping the iron to the ground. She brought out her tally book and stub pencil to record the morning's work, while her father threw off his loop and reached for the piggin' string.

"Hold up a spell, ole-timer," a deep voice interrupted coldly. "Just let that critter lay and bawl a spell!"

Fern Caldwell jerked around quickly while her right hand slapped down to her six-gun on her right leg—a thirty-eight Colt on a forty-five frame balanced to fit her small hand. Her deep blue eyes were flashing when she half drew the weapon. There was no smile on her pretty face, while she stared at a heavy-shouldered man of fifty-odd with long gray buffalo-horn mustaches framing straight stern lips.

"You know better than to come sneaking up like that, Mister Gorley," she scolded sharply. "Maybe you better explain!"

"That goes for me too, Emmett Gorley," old Fred added sourly. "There was something in the growl of yore wawa I don't like any too well."

"You can like it or leave it," the newcomer barked, and his gray eyes flashed with anger while he stared at the hogtied calf. "Since when you taken to whirling a wide loop?"

Old Fred Caldwell stiffened and stopped the gnarled hand that was jerking down toward the worn scabbard on his right leg. His lips moved soundlessly under the close-clipped white mustaches. And when he had finally controlled himself, his voice was like the deep boom of a brass bell.

"Better unsay them words, Emmett. Better you swallow them rapid or start makin' smoke!"

Emmett Gorley drooped his shoulders into a crouch with his hand shadowing the worn handle of his six-gun. His gray eyes were frosty and cold, and entirely unafraid while he locked glances with his neighbor. He held his position while his left hand swept out and pointed toward the hogtied calf.

"Might be well for you to explain how come you and yore gal-chip to be burning my stock with yore iron," he answered thinly. "I'm holding my hand long enough for you to give it a name!"

"Yore stock?" and Fred Caldwell allowed his eyes to follow the pointing finger. "Yore stock inside my pasture fence?"

"You burned three weaners," Gorley stated clearly, and taloned his fingers to fit the handle of his gun. "Bull calves just short of yearlin's that me and Earl was holding for breeding stock. Them calves ain't been steered, and roundup over last month!"

"You can't cut a rusty like that on me," Caldwell shouted angrily. "I'm giving you up until I count three to wheel yore hoss and make tracks getting off my range!"

"Dad!" Fern Caldwell faced her father with both hands spread wide. She walked right between the two scowling oldsters and breasted up to her father while she shook her head slowly. "We better talk this thing

out," she suggested softly. "You and Uncle Emmett have been friends long enough to know that there is some mistake."

Fred Caldwell tried to push her aside and stopped suddenly when a low growl raised his flaming eyes to his old neighbor. Emmett Gorley was holding a long-barreled forty-five in his right hand, and his lips were set in a hard straight line of angry determination.

"You do the talking while I listen." he muttered twangily. "And it better be good!"

Fred Caldwell stepped aside and faced the mounted man in a crouch. "You can't cut 'er, Gorley," he growled softly. " 'Tain't like you to grab a sneak, but what I said still goes. High-tail pronto, or I aim to match my draw again' yore drop!"

Emmett Gorley was a big man with a big man's courage. A peculiar light shifted across his narrowed eyes while he stared at Caldwell and read the sign. The old cattleman knew he would not have a chance in a shoot-out, but Gorley also knew that his old neighbor was ready to die. The spiking gun disappeared as suddenly as it had jumped to his hand, and Gorley swung down to the ground and anchored his bay with trailing reins.

"Sorry I jumped the gun that way, Fred," he murmured softly. "Got my hackles up when I see them bull calves of ours burned that a-way, and I'll listen while you tell yore side of it."

"You'll listen, Mister," Caldwell ground out gruffly. "I ain't doing any talking to a gent what tags me rustler. You better climb yore henskin and pound leather before I forget that you and me slept under the same blankets and ate salt together!"

Big Emmett Gorley straightened up and stared at the angry old-timer. "No use you and me getting boogered this away," he murmured softly. "We both of us done went off half cocked like a pair of pilgrims when a little talk might have ironed out the ruckus."

"We can start even," Caldwell barked viciously. "There never was the bat of a snake's eye between us, and I've taken all the wind-jamming from you I aim to swallow. Make yore pass, you mouthy rannyhan!"

Emmett Gorley allowed his wide shoulders to droop while two bright spots of scarlet painted his high cheekbones. "Give the go-ahead, you spavined old jug-head," he snarled. "I'll make my pass when you start to deal out lead!"

Fern Caldwell stood motionless, with blue eyes wide and staring. She knew that the two would go for their guns at the first move, and neither of them had ever been known to give back a step. They faced each other less than ten short paces apart with lips drawn back, and hands held poised for the strike that would send one or both of them out on the one-way trail. Both men slapped down when a singing noise unloosed their taut muscles.

CHAPTER II

A Tophand Roper

TWO guns roared like cannons to shatter the still quiet of the high New Mexico morning. Fern Caldwell muffled a scream with her hand when big Emmett Gorley jerked back on his wide shoulders and rolled on the springy grass. Old Fred Caldwell was crouching forward with thumb dogging back the hammer of the smoking gun when it bucked up in his hand. Then he gasped and lowered the gun to his side.

Emmett Gorley was rolling and thrashing on the ground while smothered curses growled from his snarling lips. Both powerful arms were pinned tightly to his sides. At last he stopped his struggles and stared at the taut rope back to the saddle horn where a

tall young cowboy was just lighting down. His blue eyes were fixed steadily on the scowling face of old Fred Caldwell while he came forward on the balls of his feet like a cat.

"Holster yore smoke-pole, old Fred," he advised slowly. "You and Dad got no call to gun each other down this a-way."

Emmett Gorley sagged back while his big hands caught the rope and pushed it wide. The trained horse leaned back to keep the twine tight, but the big cattleman was free of the loop and kicking up to his feet. Leaping forward like a cat on the fight, his long left arm reached out and swept his son aside like a chip on still water. Then he crouched low and faced Fred Caldwell with his lips skinned back like a savage wolf.

"You grabbed a sneak," he growled hoarsely. "I'm dealing this time!"

Young Earl Gorley tightened his jaw until little ridges of muscle stood out to make his face craggy and hard. He stood as tall as his father, but not so heavy by thirty pounds. Wide powerful shoulders, like his father's, now hunched into springy muscles when he hurled his body forward and bulldogged the older man with arms spread wide for a hold.

Old Fred Caldwell danced back and jerked his gun free, just as his daughter caught his right arm and hugged it against her pounding heart. Emmett Gorley looped into a roll and came up with fists battering at his tall son. But the young cowboy danced out of reach and planted himself between the two men.

"Bed down," he growled softly. "You two old mossheads have carried this far enough. I'm swinging the first one of you what reaches for his cutter!"

His right hand made a smooth swiveling pass and came to rest with wrist cradled against his lean ribs. Both of the older men stopped their hands and stared foolishly at each other when they realized that they were caught flat-footed. Fern Caldwell sighed with relief and released her hold on Caldwell's gun-arm, and then the tall cowboy again spoke softly.

"Thirty years you two have been pards," his deep voice accused. "You fought rustlers and outlaws back to back and shoulder to shoulder. Staked each other many's the time, and shared yore last crust of bread and chunk of jerky. How come you to go on the prod thataway and ride gun-sign again' each other?"

"I'll settle with you later, yearling," Emmett Gorley muttered fiercely. "I'll learn you to rope me like a leppy when I'm burnin' powder!"

"He saved yore worthless carcass," Fred Caldwell sneered nastily. "I had my sights centered on yore brisket when he spilled you from under my gun!"

"I ain't never shot second or missed up to now," Emmett Gorley answered quietly. "Hadn't been for him dabbing his twine, right now yore gal would be an orphant!"

FERN CALDWELL shuddered and stepped close to Earl Gorley. "I'm thanking you for what you did, cowboy," she said sincerely. "Seeing that you kept your head, maybe you can help us straighten this trouble out. Your dad accused us of rustling."

Earl Gorley stared at the girl and turned his head to study the scowling face of his father. "You said that?" he whispered.

Emmett Gorley pointed to the bull calf on the ground. "Take a good look at that critter," he muttered. "You ever see it before?"

The tall cowboy followed the pointing finger and leaned forward for a closer look. Then he sucked in a deep breath and tightened his lips sternly. Now he looked like a younger edition of his fighting sire when he turned slowly and locked glances with the girl.

"That's one of our calves," he muttered accusingly. "And it's branded F Bar C on the left flank. Mebbe you

better explain that one, Miss Caldwell!"

His voice was as hard as his tanned face while he waited for the girl to speak. "You are talking from behind a gun, Mister Gorley," the girl answered sharply. "Don't holster it," she almost screamed, when the cowboy made to scabbard his weapon. "They will kill each other!"

"It's still our critter," the cowboy snapped shortly. "Keep on talking, Miss Caldwell!"

Fern Caldwell flushed angrily and bit her lip. Her eyes blazed and then softened down when she saw her father inching his hand toward his gun. She stepped to his side and caught the hand tightly, and Earl Gorley smiled coldly with his light blue eyes.

"Please help me, Earl," the girl pleaded desperately. "There has been a horrible mistake, but we can correct it if we stop fighting and use our heads."

"Good sense," the cowboy agreed, and his deep voice was no longer angry. "Spell it out, little pard!"

"I was riding down here in the creek bed yesterday afternoon," the girl explained, "checking my tally of the calf crop, when I saw three unbranded leppies in with this bunch."

"We were holding those bull calves for breeders," the cowboy answered quietly. "How did they get on your side of the fence?"

"They were helped through," Emmett Gorley interrupted harshly. "You can see yonder where the barbed wire was cut and then hooked back!"

"Mebbe so you wanted trouble with me," Fred Caldwell growled. "Mebbe so you cut the wires yore ownself to make yore case look good when it come to court!"

"Drop it!"

The tall cowboy snapped the words and stood aside between the two older men with his gun eared back for a shot. They glared at each other and muttered deep in corded throats, and Earl Gorley licked his lips and watched them closely.

"Neither one of you two old settlers would cut a rusty like that there," he said coldly. "Best thing we can do is join forces and try to read the sign if you ain't tromped it all out."

"You can fool a man, but you can't fool an old cow," big Emmett Gorley muttered. "Look along the offside of that wire yonder."

All eyes turned where he pointed and widened when they saw three cows licking the burns on the newly branded calves. "Leppies," Emmett Gorley sneered. "A leppy is a calf what has lost its maw!"

OLD FRED CALDWELL stared at the three cows and their calves and scratched his gray head. Then his shoulders drooped wearily with shame. He turned to Emmett Gorley while a lump bobbed in his throat.

"Me and mine is rustlers, Emmett," he acknowledged huskily. "Like you said, you can't fool an old cow. Get about yore gettin's, feller."

Fern Caldwell flushed with shame and stared down at the blackened iron on the ground. "I branded those calves," she whispered hoarsely. "That makes me out a rustler!"

Big Emmett Gorley stared and knuckled his eyes fiercely. "Yo're both damn liars," he roared in a choked voice. "Neither one of you Caldwells could rustle a cow critter if it was solid gold. I ought to be shot and quartered for a side of beef for even thinking it!"

He stalked stiff-legged across the bunch grass and caught the sobbing girl in his strong arms. Held her close to his huge chest while his right hand stretched behind her and gripped old Fred like a vise. Caldwell met that grip with his rope-burned palm while the girl buried her face in the big cattleman's shoulder and sobbed with reaction.

"Saying I'm sorry to mis-doubt you thataway, pard," Gorley muttered huskily. "And we would have killed each other if that chip of mine

hadn't been the tophand roper of high New Mex!"

Fern Caldwell held him tightly and reached up to kiss his bearded lips. "I couldn't stand to think of you and Earl thinking bad of me and Dad," she whispered jerkily. "But we did brand your calves with our iron, Uncle Emmett!"

"What of it?" the big cattleman growled savagely. "You and old Fred could have every critter on the E Bar G for the asking. Me and him must be getting slow on the think in our old age."

"Looks thataway," Caldwell muttered contritely. "How you reckon them calves got shoved through here, Emmett?"

"There's rustling going on like we both know," Gorley answered thoughtfully. "And that barbed wire was cut recent and on purpose. You missing any stock?"

Fern Caldwell released herself and picked up her tally book. "Forty head of calves gone," she admitted frankly. "What became of Earl?"

The tall cowboy shouted from down in the creek bed. "Come down here, all of you. I got something to show you!"

The two men jerked at the flat quality of his deep voice. They knew that something was wrong; something that had to do with the three bull calves on the wrong side of the fence. A moment later they were in the creek bed staring at a soft spot where young Gorley was kneeling.

"Running iron," old Fred Caldwell muttered. "And two sets of shod tracks pointing at that break in the wire!"

"That's the meaning of that old fire I found," the girl added quickly. "I just started my blaze on top of it."

Fred Caldwell was staring intently at his neighbor. Then he stepped forward and offered his hand with a grunt.

"Not you, pard," he muttered. "But somebody vented our brand and run our stuff across yore range. Somebody that wanted both you and me out of the way."

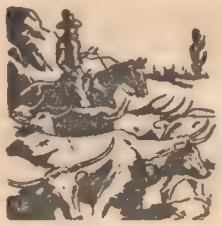
"Can I come down, or is this a family affair?" a laughing voice called from up on the bank.

Earl Gorley was on his feet like a cat, with gun spiking from his hand. Then he holstered it with a sigh when he recognized the intruder.

"Light down, Bob," he invited gruffly. "We just cut rustler sign down here in the bottom."

CHAPTER III

VENTED BRANDS



FERN CALDWELL turned her head slowly and nodded when the slender rider swung off and came down the cut-bank on braking heels. Only a rich man or a tophand could afford the rider's rigging and gear, and the tooled cartridge belt held an ivory-handled gun that glistened with silver inlay. Emmett Gorley stared for a moment and asked a direct question.

"How come you to be riding over thisaway so early, Bob Grant?"

"Checking my tally first-hand," the young cattleman answered promptly. "Colt Connors and Apache Mike allowed we was losing stock, so I rode out to make sure. I'm shy about twenty head of young stuff so far."

Earl Gorley pointed to the running iron. "Some wide-looping gang used a straight iron and a saddle ring in these parts," he muttered.

"Might just be a mistake," Grant offered, and allowed his brown eyes to wander up the bank to the tied calf. "Ain't that one of yore critters yonder?"

Young Gorley nodded slowly. "We figgered it bait to a trap," he growled. "The jigger who set the trap expected Dad and old Fred to make a draw-

and-shoot. They quit fighting their heads just in time."

"Thought maybe I was too late," said Grant smiling. "I heard two shots when I was topping the rise yonder."

Fern Caldwell frowned thoughtfully and spoke in a strained voice. "How did you know that was an E Bar G calf, Bob?" she asked. "You don't ride the range enough to know unbranded stock."

Bob Grant jerked around, and the smile left his dark face. "I was aiming to buy some of those young bull calves," he snapped. "I'm going to build up my herd later."

"That's right," Emmett Gorley affirmed slowly. "Me and Grant was looking at those calves just last week. Somebody cut the fence yonder and drove my stuff through on Caldwell's range," he added as an explanation to Grant. "Then Earl cut for sign and found this running iron."

"Looks like we ought to get together," Grant suggested. "I'll ride back with Fred and Fern, and we might find some more sign back on the mesa."

Old Fred Caldwell raised his head slowly and spoke softly to Emmett Gorley. "I'll pay for these three calves, Emmett. Got my iron on them now, and you can set yore own price."

"I offered fifty dollars apiece," Grant interrupted. "And I'd like to sell you some of mine for the same price," he added with a smile.

The old cattleman bristled angrily. "You couldn't sell me nothin'," he growled, and climbed the bank. "I'll see you later, Emmett."

CALDWELL high-heeled toward the tied calf with long-legged strides and jerked the piggin' string to free the animal. He mounted his horse and jerked his head at his daughter while he coiled his rope and hung it on the horn.

"Let's get back to the ranch, Fern."

Fern Caldwell shook hands gravely with Emmett Gorley and came close to Earl. "I want to thank you again, cowboy," she whispered. "I don't think I ever want to use a hot iron again."

"Don't you fret none, pard," the cowboy answered gruffly. "We all make mistakes, but they can be righted if we use our heads. Be seeing you tonight."

"I'll ride along with you," Grant called, and hurried to his horse. "I want to see your father about some young stuff."

The smile left the girl's face when she saw Earl Gorley frown. Then she waved her hand and touched her horse with the spurs, and Bob Grant kept pace with her until they overtook the old cattleman. Caldwell turned with a frown and stared at the young man, but Bob Grant smiled and edged his horse closer.

"You mentioned losing some stock," he began softly. "Might be a good thing for you to ride the mesa and follow some fresh sign I noticed up there."

The old cattleman made no attempt to conceal his dislike. "Yo're fairly new here, Grant," he barked. "You come up here to Hatchet country two years ago, and a reg'lar cowhand don't wear the kind of rigging and gear you do."

Bob Grant flushed angrily and then controlled his temper. "Things has changed some the last few years, old timer," he answered with a slight sneer. "I can rope and ride with the best, and I wear what suits me. I was talking about some stock you lost!"

"Lead out," Caldwell growled sourly. "But you wouldn't know a cull from prime beef when you saw it."

"Dad," the girl reproved softly, "can't you see Mister Grant is trying to help us?"

"Don't need no help," Caldwell muttered. "I'm only following the sign to show this pilgrim how much he knows about cow business!"

Bob Grant scowled and cut his horse with the hooks to rocket up the gentle slope. Old Caldwell and the girl

followed him at a slower pace to save the horses, and Grant was waiting in timber when they topped the mesa trail and stared at a grazing bunch of young stuff.

"That your stuff?" Grant asked with a triumphant ring in his voice.

"By dogies," Caldwell grunted. "That's the bunch you figgered was missing, Fern!"

The girl was staring at the weaners with a question in her wide blue eyes. "It can't be," she murmured. "They are all our calves, but we branded them just last month with our own iron. Those calves are branded E Bar G!"

"Wait a minute," Grant said jerkily, and slid from his saddle. "Hunker down here, you two!"

Fred Caldwell scowled and watched the younger man pick up a twig and smooth the ground with a gloved hand. Then he dismounted and sat on his heels with his daughter on the other side. Grant started to draw a brand while a smile curved his lips to make his dark face almost handsome.

"Your iron goes like this," he began softly, and drew the F Bar C. "Now suppose you was to take a straight running iron," he continued. "Just put another arm on that F and it makes an E. Then put a foot on that C and what have you?"

Old Fred Caldwell stared at the changed brand and came to his feet with hand reaching for his gun. "By dogies," he growled savagely. "That running iron down there in the creek bed—and it takes only two strokes to change my F Bar C to a E Bar G!"

Fern Caldwell jumped to her feet and grabbed her father by the arm. "Dad," she cried sharply, "you can't believe that of Uncle Emmett and Earl. You know they wouldn't do such a thing!"

"You stay out of this, gal," and the old man flung her aside with a wave of his arm. "I'm taking war to them Gorleys, and I don't need no help!"

Fern Caldwell caught her balance and turned on Bob Grant with eyes blazing. "Get off our land," she shouted. "All this trouble has started since you rode in here and started that dude outfit of yours!"

"Just a minute, Fern," said Bob Grant as he walked slowly toward the girl. "I was just doing what any neighbor would do."

"You hit yore saddle and make tracks for home," the old cattleman roared, and turned on his daughter with features twisting angrily. "I'm thanking Grant for reading the sign, and he knows more about stock than I gave him credit for. Now you high-tail to the spread and stay there!"

"Better get over yore mad, Fred," Grant suggested softly. "They say young Gorley is almighty fast with a cutter."

"He wouldn't draw against Dad," the girl cried. "They didn't do this thing, and I am sure of it!"

"He did draw against your father," Grant corrected. "Right down there in the creek bed!"

THE girl caught her breath sharply and stepped back. A peculiar light shifted across the pupils of her eyes while she stared at her father and slowly nodded her head. Then she climbed her saddle and neck-reined her mount, while her voice came soft and subdued:

"I'll go, Dad. I'll go if you will promise me to ride by yourself."

Fred Caldwell jerked up his head and searched her sober face. "What you meaning by that?"

"You said you didn't need any help," the girl answered quietly, and turned her eyes meaningly on Bob Grant. "The old ways are good enough for us old-timers, and I want you to use your own good judgment."

The old cattleman relaxed and nodded his gray head slowly. He turned to glance at Bob Grant with the old expression of contempt in his eyes, and his voice was calm when he gave his promise.

"Count on it, Fernie," he agreed. "Grant might do well to look over his own range since he's got such uncommon good eyesight!"

Bob Grant straightened to his full six feet, and his eyes flashed with an anger he failed to conceal. "This is law business, and you got all the proof you need," he snapped. "I can count at least a dozen of yore calves down there among the trees!"

"But we lost forty," the girl interrupted quietly.

"I heard that Gorley needed money right bad," Grant answered without raising his voice. "Those calves are just prime for veal."

The old cattleman jerked around quickly. "We didn't find any hides," he growled. "You meaning to say that the Gorleys slow-elked the rest of that young stuff?"

Bob Grant shrugged with a smile. "I didn't say anything of the kind," he corrected. "All I done was point out that yore brand had been vented."

"You suggested that the Gorleys butchered our calves," the girl accused sternly. "It wouldn't be healthy for you if Earl Gorley heard you say such a thing!"

"I'll leave it to old Fred if I said anything about the Gorleys butchering yore stock," Grant answered evenly.

"Yore talk put that notion in my head," Caldwell answered bluntly. "As a man and boy I've knowed Emmett Gorley for more than thirty years. Never knowed him to do a crooked thing in his life before."

"Before?" and Grant asked the question with a smile.

The old cattleman twisted uneasily while his lips worked under his close-clipped white mustache. "We're missing forty head," he blurted. "And I don't count more than twelve down there among the trees. What's there has the brands vented, and you tell me Emmett is hard pushed for ready cash."

"Just heard it in town," Grant answered with a shrug. "This other business is between you and him, and you just said you didn't need any help."

"That still goes," Caldwell muttered. "I'm so tangled up in my own rope this morning that I can't figger things straight, but you better make tracks over to yore own range!"

"You ordering me off yore place?"

The old cattleman turned slowly with the color mounting to his heavy face. "I ain't much of a hand at throwing fancy words together, Grant," he said sharply. "I've got some thinking to do, and you can take what I said any way you want to."

Bob Grant flecked his polished handmade boots with a glove and shrugged carelessly. "Like you said," he murmured softly, and smiled to show even white teeth. "But I'd turn it over to the law if it was me."

"Which it isn't," Fern Caldwell snapped. "I'm not a bit afraid when Dad uses his own judgment, but you have been making suggestions ever since you rode into the creek bed. Good morning, Mister Grant!"

"Hasta la vista," Grant muttered, and jumped his saddle without touching his stirrups. The girl watched him top the rise, and her face wore a troubled frown when she turned to her father.

"Did you hear what he said?" she asked.

"Huh? Till we meet again," the old cattleman grunted. "I heard his mother was Spanish, and he comes by it natural."

"Talk sensible with Uncle Emmett," the girl changed the subject abruptly. "There is something funny about all this tangle, but you and Uncle Emmett can straighten it out."

"Shore we can," Caldwell agreed, but his hand rubbed the grip of his gun when he swung up to the saddle and waved his hand. "I'll be home in time for grub."

CHAPTER IV

STILETTO THREAT

FERN CALDWELL watched her father ride down in the timber, and her heart was heavy with a premonition of danger. She saw him search behind a deadfall for a moment, and when he continued down the far slope, she scratched her horse with the spurs and raced down the mesa trail to the creek bed.

The old cows were belly-deep in the water when she splashed through and stopped at the break in the fence. Her fine eyes clouded when she studied the three bull calves that had started all the trouble, and then she slid to the ground and unfastened the wires. She led her horse through and closed the gap, and her lips set in a firm straight line of sudden determination.

Blue Water Creek watered the three ranges that formed the triangular valley. Bob Grant owned twenty sections at the far end to close the triangle, and his R Bar G outfit was the smallest of the three. No one knew where his money came from, but he paid cash for both land and stock when he had bought in to complete the triangle.

"I must see the Gorleys before Dad does," the girl muttered, and sent her fast little sorrel racing over the bottom-land.

She checked the horse when voices sounded loudly from around a bend, and the girl slid from the saddle and made her way forward on foot. She gasped when she recognized the two men talking to the Gorleys, and Earl was crouching forward with hand poised above his gun.

"You fellers better hit saddle leather and make tracks," the cowboy snarled viciously. "We can settle any differences we have here with the Caldwells without no outside help!"

The girl stopped behind a brush screen to listen. One of the men was a heavy-shouldered half-breed with a face like some prehistoric animal. Little black eyes set close together with scarcely any forehead to hold back his coarse black hair. Loose heavy mouth with long wolf teeth at each side, and shoulders that could lift a horse from the ground. Apache Mike he was called; an expert roper with the rawhide riata so seldom used by American cowboys.

The other man was a slender fellow of thirty past with two heavy guns thonged low on his skinny legs. Colt Connors—buckaroo for Bob Grant on his R Bar G outfit, and a deadly gunman with an uncertain temper. The girl shuddered and watched the face of big Emmett Gorley.

"You jiggers are a mite late," he grunted. "We found them branded calves two hours ago. Like Earl told you, yuh better ride on and do the work ye're getting paid to do!"

His voice was a hoarse bark that made no attempt to conceal his dislike. Colt Connors shifted his feet while his hands shadowed the guns on his thin legs.

"That's just what we are doing," he sneered. "Doing the work we're getting paid to do!"

HIS tone warned both the girl and the tall cowboy. Fern Caldwell shrank back in the brush while Earl Gorley taloned his fingers for the showdown he knew was coming. One little fighting word would start powder to burning, and it was Apache Mike who supplied that word.

"Rustlers," he hissed, and slapped down for his gun.

Colt Connors moved with the suddenness of a striking sidewinder that gives no warning. Both hands darted down to his moulded holsters to hit worn gun handles with little popping noises. Earl Gorley twitched his shoulder muscles and swiveled his wrist against his hip on the up-pull while his calloused thumb eared back the hammer and slipped it without a pause.

Flame gouted from his hand just before the twin guns opposite had cleared leather, and he caught the bucking gun high and dogged the hammer back on the recoil. Apache Mike was crouching forward like a great hairy monkey, and the cowboy knew he was beaten to the shot. He jerked violently when a lighter gun barked from the brush, and he held his own shot when the breed was slapped into a half-turn with the gun spilling from his clutching fingers.

Colt Connors teetered a time or two and crashed forward like a wind-blown sapling to measure his length. Apache Mike was making a dive for the gun on the ground, and both Emmett Gorley and his son centered on the barn-shouldered killer and shouted at the same time.

"Let it lay!"

Apache Mike stopped his dive and turned his heavy face upward. He climbed slowly to his feet just as Fern Caldwell slipped out of the brush screen with her smoking gun hanging at her side. Earl Gorley stared at the thirty-eight on a forty-five frame and shook his head.

"Thanks, pard," he muttered. "But you ought to shoot a heavier slug."

The half-breed was staring at the girl with glittering black eyes. "You have shoot me, Apache Mike," he screamed, and his left hand reached to the back of his neck.

The girl faced him unafraid, but Earl Gorley knew the ways of the border breed. He watched intently while Apache Mike scratched between his shoulders, and then that long left arm snapped out suddenly with silvered steel cuddled in the palm. The tall cowboy chopped a shot just as the arm hurtled forward, and the half-breed screamed again like a wounded horse and fell to his knees to nurse his shattered hand. The knife fell harmlessly to the ground and stuck point-first in the soft loam while the girl followed it with staring eyes.

"He was going to kill me," she whispered. "I didn't see the knife!"

"Connors is dead," big Emmett Gorley interrupted dryly. "There's bound to be trouble over this!"

"He called us rustlers," Earl repeated in a dazed voice. "For why, I dunno."

"Ask the Indian," Fern Caldwell suggested. "But you better wrap him up in a rope first."

The tall cowboy shook his head. "He can't do anything with a slug through one shoulder, and the other hand shot up," he said carelessly, but he kept the gun in his hand when he approached Apache Mike. "You want to talk?" he asked.

"I bleed," the breed moaned. "You fix if I make for talk?"

"Fair enough," Emmett Gorley growled. "I'll plug that hole in his shoulder while you tie his neck-rag around that hand!"

THE girl shuddered when the big cattleman picked up the knife and cut the heavy shirt away from the powerful shoulder muscles. The half-breed clamped his teeth tightly and made no sound until the crude bandaging was finished. Then he raised his head and fixed his glittering black eyes on the girl.

"She know," he muttered. "Squaw talk now!"

Both Gorleys turned to stare at the girl. "Please promise me to hold your tempers if Dad comes over," she pleaded. "He is fearfully angry!"

"What's he got his hackles up about?" Big Emmett growled.

"You know those forty calves we lost?" the girl began.

"Heard you say something about them," the cattleman answered gruffly. "Keep on talking."

"Bob Grant led us up on the mesa where he saw some tracks," the girl explained. "We found twelve head back there in the timber."

Earl Gorley shifted his boots. "The rest must be close by," he volunteered.

The girl shook her head. "Dad was searching when I left," she answered

quickly. "We branded those calves last month with the F Bar C, and now they are burned with the E Bar G!"

Emmett Gorley jumped forward and grabbed the girl by the arms. "Right that wrong," he pleaded huskily. "That makes me and Earl out rustlers!"

"You are hurting me," the girl protested. "Please keep your head, Uncle Emmett. You remember that running iron in the creek bed?"

"What about it?"

"Somebody added a line on our F to make it over into an E. Then they put a foot on the C to change it to a G. Those calves are all branded E Bar G now!"

The two cattlemen stared at her with jaws agape. Earl Gorley was the first to recover from his surprise, and he turned on Apache Mike with anger twisting his tanned face.

"You better talk, Injun," he growled like a bear.

"Squaw she talk," the half-breed muttered indifferently.

"Now hold yore mad in, you two," the girl began quietly. "I thought it was funny because Bob Grant led us right to those calves. Then he slipped when I said that you wouldn't draw your gun against my father."

"You know I wouldn't, pard," the tall cowboy growled. "How did Grant make his slip?"

"He said that you had already drawn it against Dad back there in the creek bed," the girl explained. "He must have been hiding there all the time when you stopped the fight by roping Uncle Emmett. That's how he gave himself away!"

"The dirty son," Emmett Gorley ground out. "It must have been him what cut the wire and run those bull calves through. It must have been him what vented those brands to make it out that me and Earl was packing a straight iron!"

"He suggested that Dad notify the sheriff," the girl added. "Dad told him plain that he didn't need any help!"

"And right now that old hellion is on his way over here to smoke us Gorleys down," the big cattleman muttered. "Don't know as I blame him much, seeing as how I boogered into a stampede when I saw you and him slapping an iron on our critters!"

"We must do something," the girl almost sobbed.

"Me talk now," a growling voice interrupted. "Young buck he could have kill Apache Mike. Say um *gracias*. White man my boss, he have me and Colt change brand. Too much sport, white man. You catch um, *no es?*"

"Me catch um," Earl Gorley promised grimly. "What about the rest of those calves?"

"Catch um stick," the half-breed suggested. "Now you draw on ground F Bar C!"

The tall cowboy caught up a twig and smoothed out the dirt. He drew the Caldwell brand and waited for the breed to continue.

"Make foot on C," Apache Mike grunted. "Now catch um saddle ring," and his voice was grimly vicious. "Make half circle on F and change to R. You *sabe* R Bar G?"

Earl Gorley gasped and turned to the girl. "Climb yore hull and get back to yore dad," he shouted. "Tell him what you just saw before he comes faunchin' over here on the peck. Me, I'm hunting that dressed-up rustler for showdown. Smoke that hoss's hoofs, pard!"

CHAPTER V

Gun-Sign Riders

APACHE MIKE sat slumped over staring at his mangled left hand. No sign of pain showed on his big misshapen face in spite of the two bullet wounds from which he was silently suffering. His prognathous jaw rested on his chest, and only the glittering black eyes told of the two natures fighting within the

little brain behind that low sloping forehead.

Earl Gorley watched him for a while and glanced at his father. Big Emmett Gorley shook his head and motioned for silence. As though he had caught the gesture, the half-breed raised his head suddenly and spoke in guttural tones. Not the voice of his raw Irish father, but with the simple directness of the Apache mother who had borne him, and had taught him the ways of her tribe.

"No good young squaw she go alone," he stated clearly. "No see old brave with the white hair."

"Huh?" big Emmett jerked out gruffly. "What you mean, Pache?"

"Boss man he catch um squaw," the squat breed muttered. "Old brave he count coup when he read rustler sign!"

"I got him, Dad," the tall cowboy interrupted quickly. "Mike means that Bob Grant will catch Fern, and that old Fred Caldwell will read the sign and come here to kill you and me, thinking we rustled his young stuff."

Apache Mike nodded his head slowly and without emotion. "You have spoken," he affirmed solemnly. "What you do now, white man?"

"Do?" Earl Gorley jacked the spent shells from his six-gun and thumbed fresh cartridges through the smoky loading gate. "I'll take showdown to that due pilgrim pronto," he snapped as he holstered the heavy weapon with a flirt of his supple wrist.

Apache Mike smiled grimly. "Grant no pilgrim," he contradicted bluntly. "He sabe cattle, and he *muy rapido* with gon!"

"Fast with a hand gun, eh?" the cowboy muttered. "And he ain't so much of a pilgrim as he lets on."

The breed nodded assent. "Boom—you dead," he muttered, and stared at his mangled hand. "Grant he big white chief!"

Earl Gorley straightened up and tightened his cinches while the muscles of his jaws knotted his face into craggy lines. "You better take Mike into town," he said quietly. "I'm riding after Fern to see that she don't fall into a trap!"

Big Emmett nodded his head and squared his shoulders. "Hoss flesh is cheap with us right now, son," he answered gruffly. "Kill that cayuse if you have it to do, but catch up the gal before she comes to grief!"

Earl Gorley climbed his saddle and scratched with both feet to send his horse racing across the bottom-land. Big Emmett walked into the brush and came back leading Apache Mike's horse. The half-breed levered up without a word and faced the saddle, and the big man boosted him up with a grunt.

Apache Mike found the stirrups and leaned over the nubbin with his big head cocked to one side. Then he raised slowly and turned his head to look at his captor.

"Horse he come like hell," he muttered softly. "You make Injun sign, no?"

Emmett Gorley stared for a moment with his head turned to catch the beat of drumming hoofs. Then he drew a deep breath and paced to the center of the clearing facing the mesa trail. He tugged on his heavy mustaches thoughtfully before squaring his wide shoulders. After a long glance at Apache Mike, he rapped down for his six-gun and spilled the long-barreled weapon to the ground.

The half-breed stared for a moment, after which a slow smile of admiration swept across his rugged bronzed face. "You all the same dead," he grunted. "Old brave he like loco bull!"

"Mebbe so," old Gorley grunted, and his lips tightened under the sweep of his mustaches. Then he raised his head and gave the Texas yell with all the force of his lungs.

"Yipee! Yipee!"

THERE was silence in the deep bottom-land when his ringing cry echoed against the cliffs and died away. He heard only the brawling of Blue Water Creek tumbling over the

lava-formed rocks, interrupted softly by the changed murmur of hoofs that told of a horse being checked out of a high lope. This died away to a whisper and stopped altogether, and Emmett Gorley shifted his eyes to Apache Mike and smiled with his lips.

The breed narrowed his beady eyes and filled his barrel chest with air. Then he threw back his head and whooped the Apache call of warning with a deep treble note that only an Indian can produce. Then he too smiled back at the white man and settled easily in the saddle with his chin resting on his massive chest.

Five minutes passed during which the strange pair held their positions and waited in stolid silence. Emmett Gorley faced the mesa trail with long arms hanging loosely at his sides, and his gray eyes watched the tops of the brush where the trail was hidden. His shoulders twitched slightly when the brush-tops waved ever so slightly.

"Hands up, rustler!"

The big cattleman tightened his lips when that hoarse threatening voice broke the oppressive silence. Then he slowly raised his big hands palms outward toward the trail. He spoke softly so as not to break the spell that hovered over the little clearing.

"Come on down, Fred," he said clearly. "I ain't packing a cutter."

He heard the gasp that followed his announcement, and then old Fred Caldwell came through the brush screen with heavy forty-five gripped in his right fist, and the hammer eared back for a chopping shot. With snow-white hair against the black of his battered Stetson, the old cattleman's face was a stony mask of ruthless purpose.

"Steppin' back for one time, eh?" he sneered coldly. "Shuckin' yore cutter and doggin' it to save you a killin'!"

"To save one of us a killing," Gorley corrected softly. "Mebbe so you didn't take a good look at my hands!"

The old cattleman stopped his slow advance and raised his narrowed eyes to stare at the big hands held aloft. The gun dropped a trifle in his hand while the calloused thumb slowly lowered the hammer. Then Fred Caldwell holstered the weapon smoothly and straightened his shoulders.

"The Injun sign of peace," he muttered. "Spell it out, Gorley!"

"Make much medicine," a guttural voice interrupted, and Caldwell swiveled his head to stare at Apache Mike. "We hear you coming far off, and big man throw away his gon. Mebbe so he want to live." And the breed smiled crookedly at the old cattleman.

Fred Caldwell shifted his feet and turned to stare at his old neighbor. "I rode hell-for-leather down here to kill you and yores, Gorley." His deep voice was savage. "We found that bunch of young stuff you vented to yore own brand!"

"You found the young stuff, but I never vented yore brand, nor any other man's," Gorley corrected softly. "Figgered to shuck my hardware so's you'd have time to think."

"Young Earl," Caldwell growled, "is he hiding in the bresh for to pull a sneak?"

Emmett Gorley tightened his muscles and his heavy voice was strained when he answered. "You ever know a Gorley to pull a sneak?" he rasped. "That chip of mine has gone to save yore gal!"

The old cattleman stepped back with surprise. "Fern?" he whispered.

Emmett Gorley nodded, and kept his hands high above his head. "She come chousin' down here to warn me and Earl," he explained. "We had a shoot-out with them two hands of Bob Grant's, and Apache Mike was the one who did the thinking. Told Earl to high-tail after Fern to save her from that damn rustler!"

A NEW light crept into the bright gray eyes of the old cattleman to change the fighting expression of his scowling face. Gorley could see understanding trickling through the

anger-clouded brain of his old friend, and he waited while Fred Caldwell followed events in his mind.

"It was Grant who led us to that bunch," the old cattleman muttered. "It was him showed us how that brand could be changed with little strokes of a hot iron."

"Nobody but Grant would gain anything by setting you and me against each other," Gorley answered dryly. "I'm needing ready cash, and if you lost enough stock, there's only one man who stands to cash in on it. Spell it out yore ownself."

"Bob Grant," Caldwell muttered as in a daze. "He bought in the valley, and he holds the smallest spread. He showed up there when you and me was edging at each other in the creek bed, where me and Fern branded them bull calves. Then he showed me that branded stuff of mine with yore iron on it, and I run him off my range."

"He had it all set for us to kill each other back yonder," Gorley said quietly. "When that fizzled out, he sends you down here to ride gun-sign on me and Earl. Apache Mike read the sign clear for us, and that's how come me to shuck my cutter and give you the Injun sign of peace."

The old cattleman dropped his eyes and tugged at his white mustache. Then he shrugged his square shoulders and came slowly across the clearing with his right hand extended, and a shamed smile on his weathered face.

"Saying I'm sorry I got boogered that away, old pard," he muttered under his breath. "I'd admire for you to forget it and touch skin with a dang old fool!"

Emmett Gorley lowered his arms and gripped the old cattleman hard. "No more fool than me," he growled huskily. "You and me both owe something to that redskin yonder. Hadn't been for him, one of us would have been dead, and yore gal in the hands of that slick rustler."

"Grant?" and Fred Caldwell jerked around and scanned the mesa trail. "You seen him?"

"Mike figgered Grant would stop the gal from getting to you," Gorley answered. "So Earl he lined out down the back-trail to cut in on the play."

The old cattleman clenched his gnarled hands while his chest rose and fell with the effort he was making to control his fear—fear for the safety of his only chip. He stiffened when Apache Mike spoke softly.

"Grant he heap fast, but young brave he faster," the breed said positively. "We go now?"

Emmett Gorley crossed the clearing in long strides and gripped Apache Mike by the arms. The half-breed stared at him with lips tightened to control the pain of his wounds.

"Any gent what comes clean deserves a chance," the big cattleman growled huskily. "You'd get ten years in prison, Mike," and then he shook his head. "Mebbe you'd rather heal up yore hurts and make a hand on the E Bar G!"

Apache Mike jerked suddenly and opened his black eyes wide. "You no send me to prison?" His voice expressed his doubt. "You say to Mike that I work for you?"

"I have spoken," big Emmett grunted roughly. "You saved a heap of grief for all of us. Right now yo're as free as the air!"

The half-breed straightened his drooping shoulders and wrinkled his ugly face into a smile. "Me no hurt no more," he answered huskily. "Me work all my life for you and young white brave!"

CHAPTER VI

Hot-Iron Heritage

FERN CALDWELL stopped her lathered horse at the cut wire in the bottom pasture of Blue Water Creek. Unfastening the loose wires, she led her horse through and turned to replace the twisting strands. A warn-

ing rustle sent her sidestepping with right hand slapping down for the gun on her chaps. But a snaky loop circled her arms and pinned them tight before her fingers could touch familiar wood.

Digging her high heels into the soft loam, she whirled like a cat fighting the rope with all the power of her young muscles. Then she was spilled to her shoulders when the rope jerked viciously. A soft purring voice came from the edge of the brush when a running loop flipped down the rope and caught her boots in a tie.

"Bed down and take it easy, gal. I kinda figgered you was carrying tales!"

Bob Grant came out of the brush then and leaned over to make a tie around the straining arms. Fern Caldwell stopped struggling and glared up into his dark smiling face. The tall rustler picked her up in his strong arms and carried her back beyond the brush screen that formed the boundary between the E Bar G and the F Bar C. Then he put her down on the ground and straightened up to shift the gun on his leg free of holster hang.

"You was going to tell yore dad what you found out," he sneered. "I heard that shooting over yonder—knew Connors and Mike had shot second when I see you start to backtrail!"

"You rustling killer," the girl whispered hoarsely. "You didn't have the nerve to face Earl Gorley, so you set your paid killers to do the job!"

"And they failed," Grant answered with a shrug. "Perhaps you see how much I fear yore friend Earl Gorley."

"It was you who rustled our stock," the girl accused hotly. "To make it look like the Gorleys did it!"

"Just those few calves," the rustler answered with a smile. "The rest of them are branded and registered under my own iron. I want this valley, and I aim to have it."

The girl stared for a moment and then shook her head with a brave smile. "You won't ever get it," she contradicted. "Apache Mike talked, and there are three men who heard him."

Bob Grant tapped the gun on his right leg. "Just four more notches," he answered carelessly. "And then I will buy up both spreads cheap."

"You better make it five notches," the girl murmured, and her throaty voice was husky. "I'll tell what I know to the law!"

"I was afraid of that," the rustler answered lightly. "You will be my wife, if you are as smart as I think you are—or else it will be like you said." And again he tapped the handle of his gun.

The girl nodded her head in agreement. "I'll take the fifth notch," she said clearly. "I would rather be dead than have you touch me!"

The tall rustler frowned and clicked his white teeth. "As you will," he answered with a shrug. "But there are many ways to tame a wildcat."

He leaned forward and picked up the blackened running iron from the ground. "A hot iron, for instance," he murmured softly. "I am an expert with this," he added meaningly.

THE girl shuddered and then became very quiet. The brush-tops had moved slightly beyond the edge of the little clearing, and Fern Caldwell stared at the toes of her boots to keep her eyes away from the swaying alders. A new note of confidence was in her voice when she answered the tall slender rustler.

"It was a hot iron that started all this trouble, and it will be one that settles it."

Bob Grant jerked up his head when he caught the change of voice. His eyes wandered slowly toward the brush screen while his right hand made a claw that poised above the scabbard on his leg. A hard rasping voice stopped the movement when Earl Gorley stepped into the clear with his gun spiking from his fist.

"Don't booger, Grant," he warned sternly. "Right now my thumb is sweating to slip hammer!"

The tall rustler shrugged his shoulders and dropped the running iron to the grass. "I expected you," he said quietly. "But I didn't think you would grab an edge."

Earl Gorley shifted his feet and studied the remark. "You figgered on grabbing the edge yoreself," he answered with a sneer. "I heard some of yore wawa!"

Again the rustler shrugged. "But not with you," he contradicted softly. "I heard that you were fast, and now I know it. You killed Colt Connors, and he was not exactly slow."

"Never saw a two-gun hombre that could use both hands fast," the cowboy grunted. "His irons never cleared leather!"

Bob Grant raised his dark eyes with surprise. "So fast as that?" he murmured. "And Apache Mike?"

"Fern pulled his stinger," the cowboy grunted. "And I knew all about that knife he carried at the back of his neck between his shoulder blades!"

"But he still lives," the rustler purred, and sighed deeply. "*Hombre muerte no habla!*"

Earl Gorley stiffened at the callous indifference. "Dead man don't talk," he repeated in a whisper. "You killin' lobo!"

The tall rustler smiled and showed his white teeth. "Did he not prove unfaithful?"

"What do you know about honor?" the cowboy rasped. "A killing, thieving rustler like you?"

"I kill, yes," Grant admitted with hesitation. "But always I give the other hombre a chance. What you call the code," he added softly, and studied the changing expression that swept over the cowboy's tanned face.

"Stand where you are and don't move a finger." Earl Gorley held the drop while he stalked stiff-legged across the clearing. He leaned down without taking his eyes from the rustler while his fingers found the knot and loosed the ropes that held the girl a prisoner.

Fern Caldwell stretched to her feet and threw off the coils, and Earl Gorley backed up to his old position to face the rustler squarely. Bob Grant smiled arrogantly and waited as though he already knew all the answers, and he showed no surprise when the cowboy explained his intention.

"You spoke about the code, rustler. A draw-and-shoot from scratch, with no odds asked or taken!"

"That is the code," the rustler agreed with a smile. "And the girl?"

"She takes her gun in her hand to protect herself, but she won't need it," the cowboy answered grimly. "A gent can't do his best work when he knows he is wrong!"

FOR a moment he stared at the dark handsome face ten paces away. Then he flipped his hand and snugged his six-gun down in the moulded holster with the handle tilted out for a speedy draw. Fern Caldwell gasped and drew her light gun. There was a catch in her voice when she made one last appeal.

"We can take him for the law, Earl."

The cowboy shook his head stubbornly. "We don't take rustlers for the law back here," he said sternly. "On top of that, the boys would hang him on a tree if we tried to take him to jail."

"We were talking about the code," Grant interrupted softly. "I am waiting!"

"You can wait awhile," Gorley snapped. "Let's you and me get this thing all straight. You changed the F Bar C brand to make yore R Bar G. How many head you run off so far?"

"Eight hundred," the rustler answered promptly. "Old Caldwell told me that I knew nothing about the cow business." And he chuckled deep in his throat.

"Yo're quite a hand with a hot iron," the cowboy admitted grudging-

ly. "And you've handled yore last one!"

Grim finality in the growling tones of his deep voice that was now edged with a sneering contempt. The smile left the dark face of the rustler when he crouched forward from the hips, and his lips snarled back over his clenched teeth.

"Not the last," he purred savagely. "You forget the one in my holster. Many times has it been hot, and now my fingers ache to feel the heat of metal. Are you ready, vaquero?"

Fern Caldwell stepped forward and raised her left hand. Her face was white under the tan, but her voice was strong and steady when she stopped whatever answer the cowboy was framing.

"I'll call the word," snapped the girl as she covered the rustler with her gun when he jerked his dark eyes around. "We all know what it means!"

Again that slight smile twitched the corners of the tall rustler's mouth. He nodded his dark head and settled himself easily on the thin soles of his handmade boots. Earl Gorley was watching him without winking his clear blue eyes.

"The lady has decided," Grant murmured softly.

Fern Caldwell glanced at the cowboy and closed her eyes for a brief moment. Her lips moved silently, and then she raised her head and parted her lips.

"Hot iron!"

It was the old call of the branding fire, and the two men went into sudden motion like the shadows of each other. The tall rustler found his gun handle and swept up with scarcely a pause to mark the up-pull, and the silvered barrel hissed against oiled leather like the keening cry of a striking hawk.

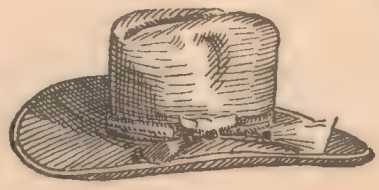
Earl Gorley made a swiveling draw with wrist cradled against his ribs. But his left foot lashed out to throw his body sideways to the right just as the heavy gun roared and bucked up in his hand. He felt the tug of metal against his flapping vest when the rustler's gun echoed his shot to make the two sound like one. He caught the bucking gun in his hand and eared back on the recoil for a follow-up, but held his shot when Bob Grant opened his fingers and spilled his gun to the grass.

The tall rustler was swaying like a wind-blown tree while he fought desperately to keep his balance. His knees buckled suddenly when dying reflexes jerked their last muscular effort. He tumbled to earth and rattled his long legs a time or two, before they straightened out with silver spur wheels spinning a flashing circle.

Earl Gorley lowered the smoking gun and touched the barrel with the finger of his left hand. Fern Caldwell crept up to the tall cowboy and laid her hand on the metal beside his own. Her right arm swept up around his neck and pulled his head close to her lips, and he held her close while their fingers found warmth on the smoking gun.

"Hot iron," the girl whispered.

The cowboy smiled gently and pressed the gun sideways against her shoulder. "That's a E Bar G iron, Fern. Reckon I'll have to change yore brand."



The Lone-Hand Hombre

By Glenn A. Connor

Nothing much ever happened in the sleepy cowtown of Dry Valley. But Bill Cass was one old day-dreamer who finally routed the sheriff's bench-warmers out of their eternal siesta. And there was no stopping Bill when he high-tailed out of town clutching that five thousand dollar reward poster in his horny paw.

SHERIFF NEWT PEEVY thumbed through his mail, most of which were circulars to be posted of "MEN WANTED." As usual, their pictures were so defective it would be any man's guess to identify the individual if you met him face to face. Rewards offered for the capture of such men ranged from a hundred dollars up.

Peevy snorted and tossed the final poster over to his deputy, Walt Peters. It wasn't as if he didn't already have the walls of his office plastered with such circulars until it looked more like a rogue's gallery. The rewards represented a fabulous fortune if a man could have collected them all. But none of the "wanted" ever seemed to drift onto his range. That accounted for Peevy's disgust.

"Wisht I had five thousand dollars," mused Bill Cass aloud. "I'd buy me them old placer diggin's over on Swanee Gulch. There's pay dirt still in them workin's. Betcha I'd make a million."

Nobody ever paid any attention to Bill Cass. He was considered harmless. Always going to buy something if and when he got the five thousand —the sum never varied.

Cass spent all his idle time sprawled in the doorway of Peevy's office as he was sprawled now, back

against one side, feet propped against the other, his eyes ceaselessly roving over the three walls where the circulars were posted. This he did by the hour, seemingly fascinated. He was the object of many feeling oaths from Peevy and Peters when they wanted to get in or out, usually compelled as they were to step over him. As Cass had no fixed employment, his time was usually idle, which means he was there as now.

Peevy became moody after disposing of the latest poster, reflecting on his particular bad breaks. Nothing ever happened any more around Dry Valley—not since the placer mines had been worked out. Dry Valley didn't even have a bank any more. The town, once made lively by more than five thousand souls, had shriveled under the blazing sun and hot winds to less than a hundred. Dobe Street was Dry Valley's main street and once boasted twenty saloons. Now only one saloon was left running.

But Peevy didn't wonder that nobody ever came to Dry Valley any more. Of course there was the artist fellow who had dropped off at the depot one day from the tri-weekly—Peevy called it the Try Weekly—train, and had taken up an abode in one of the deserted cabins that was scattered about the country wherever good placer prospects had shown. But he had come for his health and to paint desert scenes. Peevy remembered he had seen this artist fellow just twice in as many weeks.

"Yes, sir, there's gold in them draws yet, I betcha," Cass's musings interrupted the sheriff's gloomy thoughts. "An' for only five thousand I could buy up all them old Swanee Gulch holdin's."

Peevy snorted and slid down farther in his easy chair. Peters tossed to Cass the poster that Peevy had given him, grumbling, "Well, there's your five thousand, Cass. For cripe's sake, go out and collect it and let us rest!" So saying, the deputy tipped his chair against the wall and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

Cass picked the poster up and unfolded it. His eyes bugged open, then narrowed. He shot a wary glance at Peevy whose eyes were closed—then one at Peters. Cass was reassured. The deputy was already snoring. Softly and very gently he lowered his feet to the threshold and sat up. He slid his feet out, then his body. Out of sight of the doorway he hurried off.

The heat outside and the lowered blinds within were conducive to sleep. The Consolidated Queen's messenger trotted past without disturbing their siesta, attested by their uninterrupted snores.

It was sometime later that Peevy snorted and sat up. His eyes opened suddenly. He was first conscious that the big hulk of Cass no longer blocked the doorway. Then he sprang to his feet as he heard running thuds coming toward his office. Before he reached the door a form busted through it, his face pale, his eyes bugging until they could have been knocked off with a pick handle.

"Peevy—the express office—has been held up!"

Walt Peters' chair hit the floor with a crash. Both stared open-mouthed at the express clerk. Peevy was first to recover from the surprise.

"You're kiddin' us," he grinned. "There ain't been nothin' valuable enough expressed here to steal since the placers—"

"Oh, there ain't?" yapped the express representative. "It's the Consolidated Queen's payroll! And if you fellows don't hurry—"

"Consolidated Queen!" roared Peevy. "What'n hell's their payroll doin' in Dry Valley?" But he was already buckling on his gun and grabbing for his hat. Peters followed suit.

"Their payrolls have been held up and they thought they'd try gettin' it through Dry Valley. Takin' it across country."

They were in the street now. Peevy broke into a gallop. He bawled over his shoulder at Peters to get their horses. He and the express clerk headed for the express office.

"I was turning the jack—over to their messenger when a fellow walked in—and stuck a gun in our faces!" the clerk explained jerkily, hopping along at Peevy's heels.

"What'd he look like?" puffed Peevy.

"How the hell do I know? First I thought he was a coon. Black mask covered his whole face!"

PEEVY found nothing at the express office to help him. Not much. The payroll was gone. The Consolidated Queen's messenger lay bound hand and foot. "How come?" demanded Peevy, indicating the messenger.

"He tied us both up," the clerk explained. "We rolled over back to back and he untied my hands. Then I untied my own feet and beat it to get you."

"It's the Lone-Hand Hombre!" groaned the messenger, as soon as Peevy had removed the gag from his mouth. "This makes five times he held up our payroll!"

Peevy gave a violent start. Where had he heard that appellation before?

"Used to work for the Consolidated Queen," the messenger went on. "Got canned. Real name's Jule Larkin."

Then Peevy remembered! The poster he had received in the latest mail. He'd passed it on to Peters. "Well, I'll be damned!" he exploded.

"There's a five thousand dollar reward for him," the messenger informed, straining at his bonds that Peevy had forgotten to cut in his sudden excitement.

"Don't I know it?" breathed Peevy, as he bent over with his knife to cut the bindings. "Looks like at last me and Walt is to get a break!" he exulted, more to himself. "Me, I can use my share of that five thousand!"

"Then get out after him!" yelped the messenger.

Peters arrived with the horses, and Peevy came bouncing out of the express office.

"Walt, where's that poster I give you this mornin'?"

"Huh? What poster?" Walt looked at him, blinking.

"Why, you dang fool, that'n about the Lone-Hand Hombre!"

"Oh, yeah, I rec'lect. I passed it on to Bill Cass," grinned Peters. "He was still cravin' five thousand dollars—"

"You go back there and get that off Bill Cass!" he howled, jumping up and down. Then he calmed himself and explained lowly, "The holdup was this Lone-Hand Hombre, if this messenger fellow is right. I'll see can I cut his sign. Rattle your hoofs, Walt!"

Peters caught up with Peevy heading down a coulee. "Damn that Bill Cass, Newt, he must have taken it off with him. I couldn't find it nor him neither."

Peevy cussed with an inspired tongue. "Any other time he'd be right under our feet! What's he want of it anyhow?"

Peters shook his head. "Aw, Bill's just like a little kid. All tooken up with them rewards. Look how he's all time starin' at 'em. Tell you what, Newt. Bet if we took that stuff down, Bill never would bother us no more."

"Maybe, maybe," grunted Peevy impatiently. "But right now I'd like to wring his damn neck. Say, Walt," he exploded in sudden inspiration, "you don't reckon Cass got ear of this holdup and the dang fool struck out after him?"

"Aw, Newt," gibed Peters. "You know dang well Bill's cravin' five

thousand dollars all the time is just habit. The darn cuss has been harpin' on it ever since he showed up in Dry Valley. But he's harmless. Anyway Lem Briggs told me Bill come and got his buckskin and said he was ridin' out to Swanee Gulch to look them old workin's over. He's probably rode there to dream and build more air castles, or to figger something new to do with five thousand. You cut any sign?"

"Yup, right here in this coulee. I don't know who, why or what-for made 'em. But there's hoss tracks, and the fact they're follerin' this coulee out of sight of Dry Valley, and this coulee twists by within a hundred feet of the express office—it looks like a good bet. But how we goin' to know this Lone-Hand Hombre when we meet up?"

"Didn't you read his picture and description?"

"I didn't," confessed Peevy. "I just saw he was called the Lone-Hand Hombre. I never read no further because I never heard of him before."

Peters nodded. "Me, I didn't see no further'n the reward and passed it on to Cass, seein' that was the sum he craved. Well, we'll just have to track him down."

"If we can. And he don't cover his trail," grouched Peevy.

"I can track a canary when there's five thousand dollars in it," declared Peters.

"Hop to it, then," ordered Peevy. "Every minute we waste is giving him the jump on us."

OUT of sight of Dry Valley the trail quit the coulee and headed into the mesquite. It was Peevy who first noticed that the tracks were leading them in a big arc around to the other side of Dry Valley. Peters was some little distance to one side, off his horse now, and wandering around like a man who had lost his bearings. Peevy rode to join him and tell about the strange fact that soon they would be south of Dry Valley if the tracks continued in the present arc—when Peters got his speak in first.

"He went and done it, the Hombre did, Newt! The dang cuss has went and muffled his hoss's hoofs. Right back there the last track is plain as the nose on your face. Then they just go up in thin air!"

"See any boot tracks? High heels should make some imprints."

"Nary imprint. But the grass is plenty tramped down."

They argued for the next ten minutes about what to do. Peters wanted to strike at random, taking the general direction the tracks had been going.

Peevy snorted, " 'Tain't no use, Walt, we'd just be travelin' in a circle." Then he told Peters how the tracks had been leading in an arc to the south of Dry Valley.

"Then let's head south, too," proposed the deputy. "He's bound to line out in a straight course, and maybe it's south since he stopped here to muffle his tracks."

Peevy shook his head. "Ain't no tellin'. Maybe it ain't the Lone-Hand Hombre a-tall. My gosh, Walt, did it ever strike you that it might be somebody right there in Dry Valley heard about the payroll and pulled the job? Now looky here, these tracks has been leadin' us right around Dry Valley. It ain't unreasonable if they went right back to town while we been foolin' around out here!"

"Didn't the Consolidated Queen's messenger say it was the Lone-Hand Hombre?"

"Maybe he was just jumpin' to conclusions on account the Hombre held up their payroll before. He was masked so how the hell could the messenger tell? Anyway, if he's right, why'n hell would the Lone-Hand Hombre be foolin' his time away circlin' around thisaway? 'Pears like he'd line out for the brakes fast as he could."

Although he knew Peevy might be talking sense, Peters felt contrary. Then there was the matter of a five thousand dollar reward for the Lone-Hand Hombre, that didn't make Peevy's suggestion appeal to him none a-tall.

"You'll be suggestin' next that Bill Cass done it!" Peters snorted.

Peevy started, reflected, then shook his head, chuckling, "I've known some damn queer things to happen in my time, Walt. But Cass," he snickered, "is a case there ain't no doubts about. Him with a two-ounce brain couldn't hurt a fly nor get off with a crumb of bread if it was given him."

"But he took that poster," reminded Peters grumpily.

"You give it to him. Reckon Cass took it for granted you meant him to keep it. Well, we've lost the trail," Peevy abruptly changed the subject. "And ol' Sol is bearin' down to beat old Nick. Let's amble back and have a look around town."

"I'm dry as a fish. Let's ride over to Decker's Spring first and quench our thirst."

Peevy grumblingly consented.

They were still a half mile from the spring when Peters reined up suddenly and plucked something out of the mesquite. He held his pinched fingers up so the sunlight reflected on them.

"Newt, there's been a hoss critter past here!"

Peevy stopped, stared, and snatched the tuft of hair from the deputy's fingers. "A buckskin!" he ejaculated. They regarded each other, too dumbfounded to speak.

"Bill Cass's buckskin!" said Peters weakly.

"And he ain't ridin' toward Swanee Gulch!" discovered Peevy. "Walt, it ain't possible! Bill Cass couldn't!"

"Why not?" It was Peters now who was uncertain. "I know it sounds screwy as hell, Newt. But you said your ownself you'd known of some damn queer things to happen. After all, what d'we know about Cass? He just drifted into Dry Valley outa nowhere. Do we know where from? Not any! Why, he might even be the Lone-Hand Hombre!"

Peevy started to laugh, cut it short as he reflected. "Cass ridin' over thisaway—" he mused and clamped his lips.

"That settles it!" muttered Peters, swinging back on his horse. "That buckskin's hoofs were sure as hell muffled."

Peevy's jaw protruded. "Come on, Walt, that Bill Cass is sure our meat!"

THEY rode into sight of the old cabin at Decker's Spring. It wasn't until then that they remembered this was the place the artist fellow had taken his abode. Some sort of activity was going on there. Peters forgot Bill Cass for the moment and snickered. A scrawny team of ponies that the artist bought on his arrival in Dry Valley, was hooked to the rickety rig that had been thrown in with them. In the back of the rig was the artist's luggage, and he was still piling more plunder on top.

"Looks like," chuckled Peters, "our paint dauber is fed up on desert scenery and is movin' out." Peters headed for the spring while Peevy paused for a few words with the artist. Togged in white trousers, white shirt, white low shoes and a Panama hat, he formed a strange contrast with his surroundings.

Peevy mentioned the holdup that occurred in Dry Valley and asked the artist if he had noticed anyone riding through.

The artist first shook his head, then said, "Wait a minute. Come to think I did see somebody. Along about the middle of the forenoon I

think it was. A man on a buckskin horse."

"That was Bill Cass!" Peevy exclaimed.

"I couldn't say who he was, not knowing Bill Cass from Adam. But I know this fellow was riding fast—too fast considering the heat. That's how I happen to remember about it."

"You couldn't tell what the fellow looked like?"

The artist didn't appear to hear him. Walt Peters was coming toward them. He had left his horse at the spring and was walking fast. The artist deigned not to notice him as he strode back toward the hut.

"Newt!" croaked Peters, his tone hoarse with excitement. "Bill's buckskin is down in that dugout stable by the spring! Where—"

Peters suddenly stopped as he glanced toward the artist. A snub-nose pistol in each hand covered them.

"Put 'em up, gents," the artist ordered them coldly.

Peevy jerked his head around with an audible gasp. He gasped again as he saw the brillfant glitter of the artist's eyes and almost fell out of his saddle.

"Get off and rest your saddle, sheriff."

Peevy lost no time in obeying. One at a time he had them unbuckle their weapons and drop them to the ground. Kick them out of reach. By this time Peevy recovered from the shock and found his tongue.

"What damn outrage is this?"

"As soon as I saw your pard coming up from the spring I knew the cat was out of the bag," said the artist. "Your friend Cass rode in a couple of hours back. Sorry I had to beef him. But you see I found his horse down there in the stable, his hoofs muffled. Very odd under the circumstances. Then I caught your pard snooping in my cabin. So I up and shot him."

"You shot—killed Bill Cass?" ejaculated Peevy. The artist nodded, smiling coldly.

"I take it you gentlemen are looking for the Lone-Hand Hombre? Well, here I am."

Peevy and Peters turned to gawk at each other. When they looked again at the artist, a surprising thing happened. The thud of a missile striking flesh. They heard it without realizing its source or the target. When they looked back the Lone-Hand Hombre gasped and sank to his knees, blood streaming into his face.

"You pinged me when I wasn't lookin'!" bellowed Bill Cass. His huge, formless hulk catapulted through the doorway, carrying his victim with him. A dozen feet from the doorway they came to earth, Cass astraddle the Lone-Hand Hombre's back. He twisted his captive's hands around and behind his back as dexterously as either Peevy or Peters could have done it. Then he raised his blood-matted head and glared at the two challengingly.

"It's mine!" he bellowed. "That five thousand reward! *I* captured the Lone-Hand Hombre."

Peevy and Peters exchanged stunned glances. Peevy nodded reluctantly. "He's got us there, Walt. The Hombre had us in a hell of a tight." He turned to face Cass. "But how come, Bill? How'd you know this artist was the Lone-Hand Hombre?"

"I recognized him from that pitcher on the poster you-all give me!" gloated Cass. "You dern fools, all you know is to sleep!"

"Don't rub it in, Bill," groaned Peters.

"What the hell will you do with all that money, Cass?" grumbled Peevy.

"Why, I figgered that all out ridin' out here," said Cass seriously. "I'm a'goin' to start a fur farm."

"A—which?" choked Peevy.

"Cat fur," stated Cass, his eyes suddenly twinkling. "I'll raise rats to feed the cats. Then the rats can eat the cats I skin. No expense, see? The cats eat the rats and the rats eat the cats. Betcha I make a million!"

Peevy snorted and frowned at Cass. He realized all of a sudden Cass wasn't the fool they had taken him for. One more question would settle this whole thing, once and for all.

"Bill," asked Peevy, "will you tell us why you muffled your horse's hoofs?"

"Sure," agreed Cass, grinning weirdly. "I figgered you fellers might wake up and try to foller me. So I blanked my trail."

Peters swore softly.

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The last of the Morrisons had fogged back to uphold the law in Midasville—only to be framed as a law-breaker. And instead of being handed a sheriff's star, he got a trigger ticket that sent him to jail.

THE county trustees held their meeting in the store building courthouse on the steep main street of Midasville, a gold mining town in the Painted Hills. In the musty second floor room six prominent citizens slouched in chairs arranged in an oval, listening to the report of Chairman Henry D. Kaiser, A peevish, dried-looking cattleman, he droned on monotonously to an accompaniment of yawns, throat-hacking, feet shuffling, and the *bup* of tobacco juice landing in the sawdust-filled box in the middle of the floor.

It was hot. The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the tin roof. Through the open windows the main street lay writhing in an agony of heat waves.

Sam Murphy stirred from a half-doze with faint interest in a sound

from the bottom of the stairway. Henry D. Kaiser droned on. Dave Dudley, a man with honest blue eyes, holding a shotgun across his knees, and Baumgarten also heard someone coming. Presently Green and Kotecki and Barton joined them in watching the landing through the open doorway.

A sombrero rose up the stairs, over a face tanned almost to walnut stain hue. A broad-shouldered young fellow in a gray flannel shirt, corduroy trousers, and riding boots, and wearing a six-gun holstered on his hip, paused on the landing. Respectfully taking off his sombrero, he came forward mopping his forehead with his sleeve as he glanced about for a seat in which to await his hearing.

Annoyed at the distraction he caused, Chairman Henry D. Kaiser stopped talking to glare at him. It gave Sam Murphy his chance to speak up in his kindly way. "Well, friend?"

"Something you want?" Kaiser added snappishly.

The stranger grinned and moved nearer with a loose-jointed swing of his hips. "Yes, sir, I reckon there is I've ridden a hundred and ninety miles in six days to be sheriff here. My name's Jim Morrison."

"Morrison?" exclaimed Baumgarten. "Related to our Sheriff Colt Morrison we—er, buried last month?"

"He was my uncle. Twenty-four years ago, ahead of Uncle Colt gettin' the job, your sheriff was Hoss Morrison, my father. I'm twenty-two, born in Colorado on a ranch," he explained, grinning with a flash of white teeth.

"Ahead o' my father, your lawman here was Lucky Lew Morrison. Lucky was my grandfather." His grin of pride lessened and he began twisting his sombrero by its brim. "We Morrisons have kept the peace in all o' Midasville's history. So when I heard of Uncle Colt dyin'—shot, I guess he was—"

"In a holdup," Barton frowned. "Your uncle was killed by someone he knew. That is, we didn't learn who, because Colt couldn't talk. But his gesturin' showed he'd recognized the hombre that shot him. The two or three of 'em got away, but Colt Morrison saved twelve thousand in gold dust belongin' to the Midas Mine just outside town."

"The dust was in my express office next door, waitin' shipment to the mint," Dave Dudley explained. He fingered the shotgun lying over his knees. "There's twice as much settin' there now, and while we ain't got a sheriff I'm guardin' it and Murphy sleeps there with me nights."

"Hold on," Sam Murphy said with an expectant smile. "Go ahead, Morrison."

The newcomer swallowed hopefully as he produced a much-thumbed letter and started to open it. "Soon's I heard of Uncle Colt dyin', I wrote here askin' for his job, on account of I'm the next Morrison in line. Got this answer from Mr. Samuel Murphy to come ahead, that he reckoned I could have it. He—"

Several gasps and a sharp ejaculation made him break off. The trustees, except Dudley, stared at Murphy. Henry D. Kaiser glared.

"You didn't consult me about that!" he accused.

Murphy merely smiled at Dudley, who smiled back. "His letter came addressed to 'A Trustee, Midas County,' and the postmaster gave it to me. I showed it to Dave here, and we decided on that answer. Figured to surprise you about gettin' another Morrison for our sheriff."

"You named us the sheriff-findin' committee," Dudley reminded.

Henry D. Kaiser's face suffused with red. "It don't go!" he snapped. "You're too late. He don't get the job. You men dallied so long that I finally went out an' hired a sheriff—as I was just goin' to tell you. He's wearin' the star now. He's hired, swore in, and workin'."

"Wh-at!"

Half the trustees were on their feet. Kaiser waved his hands for

quiet. "County matters ain't goin' to be handled slipshod while *I'm* chairman—"

"Which is only two weeks more, thank Providence!" Murphy flared.

Kaiser swelled like a pouter pigeon. "Well, I'm chairman now, and don't you forget it! Just this mornin' I hired a man named Tilton. Why," he declared indignantly, "with gold accumulatin' in your express office, Dave Dudley, till there's a hundred pounds of pure dust settin' there this minute, we *need* a lawman—and a *man*. Think I want to see another robbery?"

"I'll guard that dust, Kaiser!" Dudley retorted with heat. "'Tain't your worry, I reckon. 'Sides, you named Murphy and me a committee."

AS bickering heightened, Jim Morrison's first surprise changed to deep chagrin. He scowled, shifting weight, uncertain whether to go or to stay. Finally, pounding a nearby desk, Henry D. Kaiser made the men sit down, mopping sweat from their red faces and muttering under their breath.

"I'll put it to a vote to uphold my action," the chairman rapped out. "*I* say Morrisons have lawed in Midasville plenty long enough. This man Tilton is reliable and I appointed him, and he sticks! Now, all who support me vote 'aye'."

Kotecki and Barton squirmed with the look of men indebted to Kaiser and not daring to oppose him. Green and Baumgarten sighingly supported him. The vote stood four to two against Dudley and Murphy. In the silence that followed, Kaiser's triumphant eyes came to rest on the bitterly disappointed Jim Morrison.

"You ain't wanted," he snapped "and we ain't hirin' no deputy, either."

Sam Murphy got up and waddled over to him. "Son, I'm sure sorry. This here is high-handed treatment. I'd never wrote you to come if I hadn't expected this county'd stick by its word." Frowning, he picked at a callus on his hand. "If I had a job to offer you to kind of make up—but shucks, I only run a little harness shop."

"Maybe you can find work up at the mine," Dudley suggested. "Tell the superintendent I sent you. Sure sorry this happened, Morrison."

Morrison drew a long breath. "A hundred and ninety miles is plenty ridin'. And I—well, I quit a good deputy job in Poco Falls, Colorado."

His steady eyes played on Kaiser in a way that made the chairman hastily look away. "We handle things different where I come from. But since you already got a lawman, I'm wishin' the county luck."

He hitched his cartridge belt, turned, and went down the creaky staircase. Behind, he heard altercation break out, heard Henry D. Kaiser angrily berated for his hasty action in hiring the new Sheriff Tilton. Murphy and Dudley were telling him in very plain terms what they thought of him, and their comparisons of Kaiser with a well-known black-and-white rodent were not in any way complimentary to skunks.

But that was scant comfort to Jim Morrison, going dully out of the courthouse. He still could hardly convince himself that it was true. He hadn't thought there was the least doubt of his becoming sheriff here, not the least. He felt crushed.

He remembered his Uncle Colt visiting his father's modest cattle ranch in Wildcat County, Colorado, years back. "We Morrisons have all been lawmen, son—your grandad, your paw, and now me. We've all kept the peace down in Midasville, and you ought to go down there and get acquainted with the place. 'Cause it'd be a fine thing, Jim, if some day when I'm through, you'd take this here badge an' pin it on. To keep Morrison law goin', you might say."

He hadn't thought highly of the suggestion then, being enthusiastic about the cattle business. But as he grew older, and as drouth years bank-

rupted his father and later on himself, he had got the deputy job in Poco Falls. And the pride of family line, of upholding the fame of Morrison law and order, slowly took hold of him.

"Dammit, and Kaiser had to give the job to somebody else just this mornin'!"

UNTYING his roan horse at the hitchrail, he dragged it up the street past the express office to the O.K. Saloon. Morrison realized that his plight required serious reflection, for he was two hundred miles from folk he knew, had no job, nor had saved any money. Just one thin dime lay in his pocket, all he possessed over and above his roan, called Sox, his saddle, the saddle bag containing his grub, blanket roll, and the garments he stood in.

Well, the dime would buy a cool glass of beer. Maybe in the saloon he'd meet some cattleman and end up with a range job. For resentfully he knew he wanted no work at the Midas Mine. Better to ride the grub line back the way he had come than to stay here in town and let that new sheriff laugh at him up his sleeve.

As he tied his horse he saw three others ten yards down the hitchrail. They were plainly quarrelsome, and suddenly at a hard bite from the middle one, the spotted pony on this end snapped its reins as it recoiled. With ears flat, eyes rolling, it galloped snorting down the street, further enraged by the rib blows of its flying stirrups.

Another time Jim Morrison might have pursued and brought the horse back. Now he was coldly indifferent. Scowling, he stalked into the saloon.

But his luck had run out. As he sipped his beer the bartender informed him that cow outfits back in the Painted Hills were letting men go. He suggested the mine. Jim Morrison grunted, flung his ten cent piece on the bar, and strode disgustedly toward the batwing doors.

He halted, staring over them. A squat, heavy-set individual was untying his roan at the hitchrail.

"Hey!" Morrison cried, starting out. "Get away from that hoss!"

The fellow hurled him a brief glance. "Got to borrow him!" He added something indistinguishable as, presenting his back, he flung the reins over Sox's ears and prepared to mount.

Morrison ran down the plank parapet of the saloon. "Borrow? Hombre, I'm not loanin'! Take one o' them others if you got to borrow!" He meant the two animals still tied ten yards down the hitchrail.

The other growled without turning, "You'll get your crowbait back. I ain't got time—"

Jim Morrison gave a wrathful curse. Crossing the sidewalk, he stooped under the hitchrail and straightened just as the man was inserting a booted toe in the stirrup. Morrison grabbed his arm and pulled him around.

"Drop them reins!" he ordered sharply. "Clear out!"

"Listen, cowboy, I got to—"

"Dammit," he cried, "drop them reins! Is *ever'body* around here crooked?"

The other jerked to free his arm, but Morrison's fingers sank deeper. The man used his free hand to flip back his unbuttoned vest. Morrison blinked at the nickel five-pointed star pinned on his shirt. This was the new sheriff.

"Take your paws off me!" The lawman struck Morrison's wrist, breaking his hold. "I need that hoss, cowboy! Couple o' hombres just busted in the express office for a hundred pounds o' pure dust! Shot Dave Dudley as he stepped in—maybe killed 'im. Must've just fogged out o' town, and I got—"

Morrison heard, but compelling as the explanation was, it somehow failed to move him. He was thinking of his lost job—the sheriff's job this man had got that rightfully should be his.

Anger flushed his face darker. His chest rose and fell turbulently. As Sheriff Tilton turned again to mount, something snapped in Morrison's brain. With a growl he flashed a hand to Tilton's shoulder, jerking him around.

"No you don't, you tinhorn job rustler!"

For answer Tilton bashed a fist at his jaw. Morrison ducked, and the knuckles grazed his cheek harmlessly. But the blow had the effect of a cactus spine pricking through a bronc's saddle pad. It made him go berserk.

Crouching, he waded in with lefts and rights, hammering the sheriff's chest, his neck. Tilton mouthed curses as valiantly he stood his ground—but wavered at the jarring collision of a square fist with his chin.

His eyes fluttered. But only slightly dazed, Tilton sidestepped, eluding Morrison's rush. He reached for his gun. Morrison turned, gasping. Infuriated, he again charged Tilton, meaning to disarm and then beat him to a pulp.

But some one darting between them halted him abruptly. Behind Morrison some one else locked his arms. He fought to break loose as the lank individual in front snatched the six-gun out of his holster, and flipping it over by the trigger guard, suddenly jammed its muzzle into his stomach.

"Stand hitched, cowboy! Freeze!"

PANTING and sweaty, he ceased struggling — then suddenly brought up his knee to knock the six-gun from the fellow's hand. He wrenched free of his unseen captor. There were cries, curses. Sheriff Tilton eluded his grab, swinging his own whipped-out Colt like a club. He leaped in suddenly, and his weapon crashed through Jim Morrison's sombrero crown to his skull.

Varicolored lights flared like rockets in his brain. Morrison wavered, his knees watery. Roaring grew louder in his ears; then he buckled and collapsed in a billow of street dust.

At once he sought to get up. His brain cleared slowly and he groped swaying to his knees. Voices sounded louder, many voices, and he realized that six, ten, a dozen Midasville citizens were gathering. There was a heightening mélange of exclamations, curses, urgings.

"Robbed!" some one ejaculated. "The hull hundred pounds — thirty thousand dollars!"

"Dave Dudley's still layin' there bleedin'! The doc—"

"Three of 'em," Dave says. "They were masked. He stepped in, comin' from trustee meetin'—"

"Hold on! Hold on, men!" That was Sheriff Tilton's voice. "I want a posse —a tough one! And quick. Here—"

"Great cats, sheriff! This hombre's Jim Morrison—just applied for your job! Henry D. Kaiser was just sayin'—"

"Morrison? So that's his name, huh? Well," the officer roared, "he don't help no outlaws get away if *I* can help it! Interfered when I tried to fork this roan. Hey, Latigo! You and Steve start. Head west—follow along the creek. I saw their dust goin' that way. Watch for sign.

"Here! Any o' you citizens that can get hosses quick, you're deputized. Take plenty guns 'cause them lobos'll kill! They proved that on Dudley. I was just comin' along the alley when I heard somethin', like a shot, muffled. Then Dudley howled. But—uh, they'd already skipped.

"But never mind. Git, boys. I'm stayin' a minute," Sheriff Tilton stated grimly, and leaned to click manacles on the still slightly dazed Jim Morrison. "This hombre's marchin' to the lockup. Then I'll follow you. Come along, you tough Morrison—I'll show you some sheriffin'!"

Morrison rose, staring at the steel cuffs on his wrists. Lips pressed, eyes veiled in sullenness, he kept silent. While the excited Midasville citizenry continued babbling about the robbery and shooting of Dave Dudley, the new lawman seized the reins of Morrison's

roan, grabbed the manacle chain with his other hand, and started his prisoner up the slanting street.

A small boy trotted after. "Say, sheriff! Did that feller rob Mister Dudley? Was he the one shot him?"

Several men gasped. Tilton halted, struck by the thought. "Snipes! I bet two bits he—"

"Course he did, sheriff!"

"That's it for sure! He's one o' them holdups."

"Bet he's no Morrison at all. No Morrison would—"

"We oughta lynch him! Make him talk, boys—make him talk!"

They swarmed after the captive, but hurriedly Tilton quickened his pace. "Stay back now, folks! I'll lock him up and then I'll find out what he's been up to. Now don't start a lot o' wild talk!"

His words served to heighten their excitement, and as Tilton hurried his grim-faced prisoner up the street the crowd came after, constantly fattening with new members. From mouth to mouth news spread that this was one of the robbers, and as the message passed to newcomers it changed in detail and fact. Like wildfire word went around that Midasville's new sheriff, still strange to them all, had seized Jim Morrison as he ran out of the express office at the heels of his pals after they had forced Dave Dudley to open his safe, then shot him for his pains.

"The others got away with the loot. But Tilton's gonna wring it out o' him where they was headin'!"

DISTURBED, Morrison willingly hastened as comprehension came to his fast rising danger. They reached the jail, and Tilton dropped the reins of his prisoner's horse, then hustled Morrison under the hitchrail to the door.

"Git in there!" he commanded, and gave a shove. Then he turned to face the crowd.

Catcalls, threats, and urgings to "Third-degree him, sheriff!" grew louder and more ominous. Yellow-looking and shaky, but truculent, Tilton raised his hands to command silence.

"Men! Listen! Hold on to yourselves! There's always been law and order here and there's goin' to be now. Cut out your wild talk! Give me—your new sheriff—a chance to show what I can do! I'm orderin' you all to disperse. And by gravy, I'll gun-talk with anybody that stays here when one minute is up!"

There was hesitation. Muttered threats started again, but as Tilton slowly raised his six-gun those in the front rank shrank back. It started a general movement, aided by the urging of two county trustees, Barton and Kotecki. At the rear of the crowd Henry D. Kaiser appeared on a nervous black stallion.

"Men!" he appealed. "Grab hosses and come on! We got to comb the hills 'fore those fellers git too far away!"

With a shout of approval the throng rapidly melted. Tilton mopped his face, leaning against the jail door-jamb in vast relief. His hand pressed Jim Morrison's weapon deeper inside his cartridge belt as he turned. But he paused at sight of the small boy whose impulsive question had come near to firing the crowd.

"Sonny, lead that roan around back, will you? I'll need him in a minute. Just lead him around an' let him stand."

Watching the boy obey, Sheriff Tilton backed into the jail. He closed the door. He turned, seeking his prisoner—and his jaw dropped. Choking sounds came from his throat as his eyes lowered from Morrison's hard face to the black muzzle of the Colt forty-five in his fist.

"Stand hitched, sheriff! Freeze!"

Mockery rose in his gray eyes playing over the lawman. "Lucky you had this extry gun in your desk drawer. Or did Uncle Colt leave it for my inheritance, maybe? I sure needed it, Tilton, 'cause I don't hone to have you spill some cock-an'-bull yarn about

how you third-degreed me till I confessed bein' in that robbery."

Tilton glanced at the open desk drawer whence the gun had come. Little bubbles appeared on his lips. He looked ready to burst with exasperation. "Listen, you can't—"

"Get your left hand in the air! That's right, an' hold it. Now with your right, sheriff, pick that manacle key out o' your shirt pocket. Take it out—that's it. Now unbuckle your belt. Be doggone sure you don't do nothin' else!"

Whispering curses, Tilton obeyed. His cartridge belt, Morrison's six-gun, and the lawman's own holstered weapon, struck the floor with a thud. Smiling grimly, Morrison extended his two hands with the manacle chain stretched between, and in one fist the forty-five covering Tilton.

"Now unlock these. Quick!"

Shakily Tilton obeyed. The handcuffs crashed to the floor. A gesture of the Colt backed the sheriff, his face working, every line of him hinting suppressed excitement. Jim Morrison kicked the two guns under the desk out of reach. He swallowed relievedly, his Adam's apple jogging in his throat.

"I'm now a law-breaker, Tilton. But I won't be framed to start you off with a swell record! I came here expectin' to be sheriff, and it sure roiled me plenty to find Kaiser had hired you. The more I thought it over in the saloon, the more it churned me inside. And then I saw you apparently tryin' to steal my hoss. And next thing, I see that star. I never was so mad!"

"Hombre," Tilton burst out, "you're gettin' in a peck more trouble ever' minute! You're stoppin' me from pursuin' thieves that just shot a prominent citizen and got away with thirty thousand dollars' worth o' gold!"

"I know. Sure sorry about Dudley. But here I am in a pickle, so I can't let you do nothin' about them outlaws —not for a little while, sheriff. I just can't, 'cause I need a head start myself. And you sent plenty men ridin' after 'em, anyhow." He added slowly, "Back up to them cells."

"Wha-at!" Tilton yelled.

"Well, you'd come after me a-shootin'. I see by your face that you would. I know some character, and I read that you're slippery. Which means I won't let you near grease. Back up to them cells!"

TILTON'S protests were in vain. He backed, and just outside the first of four cells waited shaking with ire while Jim Morrison stood beside him and fished a ring of keys out of his pants pocket. Stepping away, Morrison ordered him into the cell, and quickly swung the door shut and locked it.

As he regarded his work a certain grotesque humor about it struck him. Morrison's face lost its grimness. "Say, I came here to be sheriff, and darned if I ain't actin' like one! Got your keys, and got you locked up as if you were one o' those gold dust bandits. This is sure a new brand of Morrison lawin' for Midasville."

He laughed uproariously until he had to holster the gun and clap both hands to his side. Tilton, with both cheeks pressed to bars, waited like a man whose patience is at the point of explosion.

"Listen—don't go yet. I—er—why, I'll be joshed by the whole county if you leave me locked up! Not to mention not bein' on the job to nab them thieves!"

Morrison shrugged and moved for the door.

"Wait! Wait!" Tilton strained against the bars. As Morrison looked back the sheriff beckoned to him pleadingly. "Listen, I—I can't afford this. Why, it'll ruin me—and right when I'm startin' here in town. Listen," he urged, "I'll pay you to let me out. I'll pay you well, Morrison. How about five hundred dollars?"

Morrison cocked his head in surprise. "No. It's a trick."

(Continued on page 122)

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...writes George Bailey

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What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist... and 20 pounds off my weight!
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But as again he would have started away Tilton raced on, "I'll make it a thousand. I—I'll give you *two* thousand, Morrison," he begged hoarsely. "That's as high as I can go. Two thousand dollars just to let me out o' here, and no questions asked!"

Morrison rubbed his jaw in frank puzzlement. "Where'd you get two thousand? You mean you carry that much around on you?"

"No—er—of course not. We'd have to go together to where I got it. But this is on the level, Morrison."

"Pshaw! Quiet down, man. Take things easy. And now I better—"

"Oh, wait—wait! The money's—well," he blurted out, "it's at a line shack. It's buried there. We'd have to go together. But it's on your way anyhow, if you're headin' northeast for Colorado. It's right on your way, Morrison," he pleaded. "And where would you ever get two thousand dollars so easy? Tell me that? Without doin' a thing?"

Morrison studied him intently and worriedly while half a minute passed. He scratched his head, scowling as he reseated his sombrero, trying to puzzle this through.

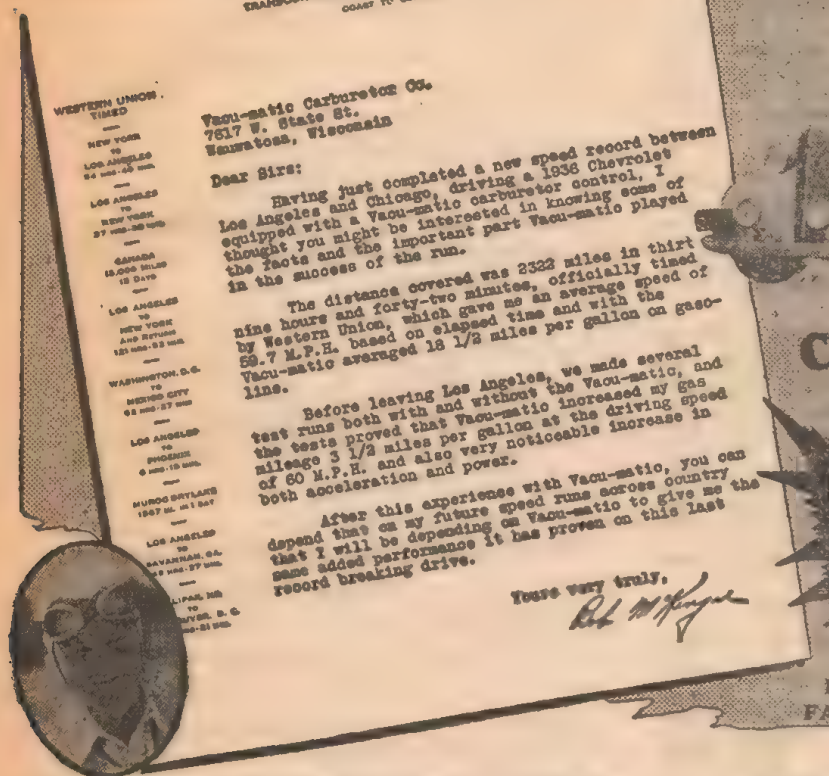
"You'll do it? Lemme out," Tilton urged. "We'll head straight there. Soon's I pay up, you go on alone. I'll start huntin' them outlaws. We'll be quits. But man, I can't stand bein' disgraced by bein' locked in my own jail my first day as sheriff! You'll do it, Morrison?" he whispered beseechingly.

He took a long breath, jerked his sombrero down over his eyes. "I almost swallowed it for a minute. But you're lyin', I see now. What would a man be sheriff for at fifty a month, if he had two thousand dollars—and hid in a line shack? Why, it's crazy!"

The lawman's groans were abruptly ended by the closing of the door. Morrison saw no one on the steep main street of Midasville, but taking no chances, hurried to his horse near the rear of the jail. Straddling Sox, he put

(Continued on page 124)

VACU-MATIC SCORES AGAIN!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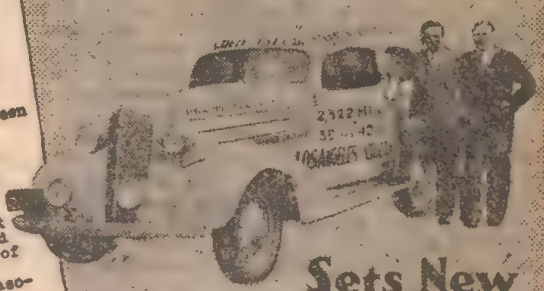

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(*Continued from page* 122)

him to a brisk run eastward out of town.

In this direction his chance of meeting any possemen was slight; nevertheless cautiously he followed the main road at a distance. After a while he left it, cutting northeast toward Cradle Pass.

Queer about that offer of Tilton's. Was the man deranged? Maybe, during their fight in the street, Tilton had got a blow on the head, something more dangerous than his own which had merely raised a sensitive bump. He had heard of men acting queer after a blow to just the right spot.

Pshaw, it was probably just his anxiety about being disgraced on his first day as sheriff. That talk about paying two thousand dollars for release—why, it was hogwash! It was.

But the man was smooth. Morrison broke into a chuckle. "He's smart as a whip! He'd grabbed me, somehow. Prob'ly knew just how he'd work it. Lucky I didn't fall for that talk!"

He sobered, eyes sliding to corners thoughtfully. "Still—I wonder if he could own that amount o' money. And would he have left it in some out-o'-the-way line shack? But what reason would there be?"

He kneed Sox faster. Then his fist struck his other palm. "Doggone it, if I see any line shacks, I'm goin' to look. Tilton said his place was right on my way. He knew I'd head for the pass. And it won't do any harm if I peek in real careful, case there'd be some kind of trap."

DURING the next hour he spied three far-away cabins, but each proved to be headquarters of a small mine. Men could be seen working near each of the three. It was just as twilight fell that he saw, on a timbered slope below the ridge on which he was riding, a log structure that stood alone, without any yawning cave that indicated a mine.

It was dark when he neared it and slid off his roan, tossing reins over

its ears. Morrison decided this might prove a good place to spend the night, and he commenced to unbuckle the strap of his saddle bag containing his provisions. Released, it eluded his grasp and fell to earth with a thud.

Leaning to pick it up, Morrison found surprising weight resistance. With a low exclamation he whisked out and lighted a match, cupping its flame while he worked the bag open.

"Holy smoke! It's gold dust!"

The match scorched his fingers and with a grunt he whipped it out. A full minute he crouched on his heels, stunned. Hefting the bag, he thought it weighed twenty or thirty pounds. Why, that meant between eight and ten thousand dollars worth of dust!

Suddenly he understood the whole thing. Sheriff Tilton on his first day as lawman was one of those who robbed and shot Dave Dudley in his express office. It was Tilton's horse, planted and ready, that had broken loose from the hitchrail and fled. So he had needed Sox, and substituted his treasure-laden saddle bag for Morrison's, probably kicking Morrison's under the sidewalk there in Midasville. He'd figured to get away before the alarm sounded—and with those other two men. They were his confederates!

Morrison licked his lips, aghast. He jumped startledly as his roan whinnied.

A low answering whinny floated through the trees. With an exclamation he clapped his hand over the roan's muzzle until he could jerk off his neckerchief and tie it on to keep Sox quiet. Then he poised, listening—and glimpsed a light through the trees.

Drawing his gun, Morrison stole forward to the little clearing that surrounded the line shack. The front door was slightly ajar and he could hear voices. He moved around the side of the cabin to a shoulder-high square opening. Fragments of greased paper at its edges were all that remained of a crude pane in lieu of glass.

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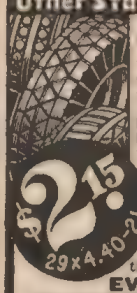

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29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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32x6	7.95	2.95
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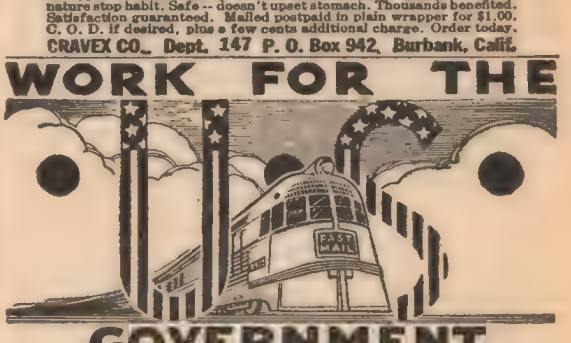

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Two men were inside—Sheriff Tilton's confederates. Latigo and Steve, their names were. One was bandaging a bloody wound in the other's upper arm. Dave Dudley must have given the fellow that, but in town it had escaped notice because of his coat, which now lay on a warped slab table. Beside the coat squatted two saddle bags.

"Ain't goin' to wait for 'em," the wounded man growled. "Let Kaiser and Tilton split their thirty pounds and feel lucky. They can't squawk to nobody, can they?"

The taller man finished his work and straightened. "Course not. But if we ain't goin' to divide our'n accordin' to agreement, we better keep travelin', Steve. Let's go pronto."

"No hurry. Kaiser's still scared from our last job. He's afraid it might come out somehow that he's the feller Colt Morrison tried to say killed him. He'll make a big show o' righteousness and lead that posse around all night. He won't come here. He depends on Tilton to fetch him his split.

"Damn Kaiser," he snapped. "He should've kept that trustee meetin' goin' longer today!"

"Well, we better clear out before Tilton comes. He'll—"

"I knew you'd cheat me, you lobos! Throw up your hands! I'll shoot!" a voice cried.

The two started violently. Jim Morrison, who had been on the point of challenging them, choked back his words. Wide-eyed, he discovered the chairman of the Midas County board of trustees in the cabin doorway with a Colt forty-five bristling in his fist.

"Wh-why, Kaiser!" Latigo ejaculated. "What you gunnin' us for?"

"That's what I say! Put that hogleg down, Henry! What you—"

"Shut up! I heard you two skunks plot to cheat me! Shove your hands higher, Steve Klein! I—I'll plug the first one of you that bats an eye!"

"Hold on, Kaiser, you don't—"

"Back up to that wall! And keep reachin'! Thought you'd—"

Jim Morrison waited to hear no more. Turning, he scurried across the clearing to the trees, then anxiously sought his roan horse. Snatching his lariat from the saddle, he returned light-footed toward the cabin in time to see Henry D. Kaiser starting to back out the door. He was still holding Latigo and Steve at bay, gripping in his left hand the two saddle bags with their sixty-odd pounds of gold dust.

Morrison halted indecisively. Then he tiptoed across the clearing until he was close to the front wall of the cabin. Hastily he moved for the door. And just as Henry Kaiser backed into view, Morrison leaped at him with his six-gun butt swishing an arc through the air.

There was a crunching sound as the steel-bound grip crushed Kaiser's sombrero crown and struck his skull. He whimpered, falling backward. The saddle bags dripped from fingers gone nerveless. He collapsed, almost upsetting Morrison as he pitched hard against Jim's knees.

But he kept his balance and leaned, snatching the gun from Kaiser's open hand. He was over the cabin threshold with his lariat clasped under one arm before the two in there could forge through their astonishment at Kaiser abruptly vanishing. His threatening gray eyes pinned them and the sweep of his two guns was convincing.

The two stiffened. "Hey! What's the meanin'—" Latigo began.

"Close your mouth! You'll do plenty talkin' when we get back to Midasville. You with the wounded arm—start toward me. Careful! Pick up that lass rope!

"You, hombre, lay down on the floor. Keep both hands stretched out! Now, toughy, you're goin' to rope your pard—and rope him good. Savvy? Then commence!"

THE yellow moon was high in the east before Jim Morrison got his three prisoners mounted on

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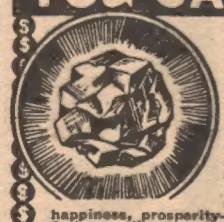

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their own horses, got their ankles securely tied to the stirrups, their wrists tied behind them. He hung the gold-laden saddle bags on Latigo's, Steve's, and his own horse as they had been before.

Using the rope from Kaiser's saddle, he threaded the bit-ring of each horse with sufficient interval to the bit-ring of the next. Holding its free end in his hand, Morrison could lead the three animals in single file. Weaponless and helpless to budge, their riders were precious little threat even if they did face his back.

The heat of the day was gone and in its place a moist, delicious coolness fragrant with pine-gum. The moon was at three-quarters, like a cream-colored plate from which a slice has been broken. There was no sound in the night save the distant mourning of a hoot-owl, the rumbling *cloddle-clop* of the horses, the low crunch of straining leather.

Jim Morrison twisted in his saddle to glance back at his charges. He turned front, grinning as he reseated his sombrero in the reflective way he had. He thought again of that suggestion years ago of his Uncle Colt during a visit to the family ranch in Colorado.

"We Morrisons have all been lawmen, son—your grandad, your paw, and now me. All of us kept the peace down in Midasville. They ain't had nothin' but Morrison law there since the town started. You ought to go down an' get acquainted with the place, Jim. 'Cause it'd be a fine thing if some day when I'm through, you'd take this here star and pin it on. To keep Morrison law goin', you might say."

The grin broke wider over his face, and Jim Morrison nodded happily. He was pretty sure now that his hundred and ninety mile trip from Colorado hadn't been in vain. He was almost positive that in another hour or two he would be the fourth Sheriff Morrison of Midas County.

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